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THE LOVERS

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Most love stories stress the deep grief one feels on being rejected. In his new novel, Mitchell Wilson approaches his subject from a different angle, and the theme of this tale of two lovers who were meant to be together but not to be happy is basically that of the eternally impending end of love.

It is that which makes The Lovers something very much more than just another romance. It is a novel of stature, in which the author has been able powerfully to establish the "atmospheric" background at which he is so skilful.

Mr. Wilson once again exhibits that mastery of the art of suspense and high degree of professional skill which have marked his earlier books and which have won him the praises of so many discerning readers.

By the same author



FOOTSTEPS BEHIND HER
STALK THE HUNTER
NONE SO BLIND
THE PANIC STRICKEN
THE KIMBALLS
LIVE WITH LIGHTNING
MY BROTHER, MY ENEMY



Mitchell Wilson

★ ★ ★

The Lovers



W. H. ALLEN
LONDON

The characters, the location, and the incidents in this book are entirely the product of the author's imagination and have no relation to any person, place, or event in real life.

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To My Wife and to My Mother

Chapter One

1

AROUND noon the last shivering wedding guest arrived at the farmhouse; then for all the miles around nothing moved on the gale-haunted moors—neither carriage, wagon, nor human figure. The road wound emptily over the low hills. The grey day turned still colder, and invisible clouds of air began to stir slowly in great icy swaths, as if signalling some convulsive change beyond the sky. From across the downs came the boom of surf against the island cliffs. Within an hour the sea wind rose to a steady moan, and then within the next hour rose still more to become a screaming ocean of air.

Ribbons of shouted laughter and music—wild waltzes and reels—streamed thinly from the house, but all the wedding sounds were engulfed, drowned, and then lost in the steady roar of the gale. Finally, at three o'clock, spits of snow became a steady swirl of white that obscured the landscape more thoroughly than any fog that had ever rolled in from the sea.

Within the house, though, the storm went unnoticed. Laughter and singing were louder than the gale; and the stamp of dancers' feet seemed reason enough for the house to shake. The children of the guests darted happy and shouting through the crowded rooms, intent on their own games, oblivious even to their parents.

The dense throng made an uproar of gaiety that had a seafaring tang. The men called themselves farmers, and with

their wives they danced the country reels; but their movements had a grace and abandon that had been learned on faraway islands whose very names evoked the thunder of surf on white barrier reefs, the colour of the hibiscus, and the sway of tall palm trees. To most of these men, though the island of Martha's Vineyard was only six miles off the New England coast, in their secret hearts it was halfway to the South Seas.

Neither pure landmen nor pure seamen, they were distinctive in a particular way—yet one man was still more distinctive than the rest.

Standing apart from the dancers, John Gosnold was tall and powerful; in his early forties. He had black, grey-streaked hair, and his blue eyes had been strained by winds, salt spray, and tropical sunshine. His fine dark suit had been made by a Boston tailor; his air of detachment came from years of command. He stood erect and serious, with his back to the fiddlers and the rhythmic stamping of feet; pretending to his world and to himself that the composed woman at the other end of the crowded parlour meant no more to him than anyone else attending their neighbour's wedding. As he looked down at his seated wife and listened to her quiet comments, all his attention was across the room behind him. He could tell without turning when Judith was looking at him and when she glanced away. It was an aliveness in his heart that came, throbbed for a moment, and then passed.

The lines of dancers moved apart as the bridegroom made his way to Gosnold's side.

"Aren't you having a good time, Captain?" The young man's habit of deference was eight years old, dating back to his first whaling voyage under Gosnold's command. On his wedding day he was only twenty-three.

"I'm having a mighty fine time." said Gosnold. He smiled quietly.

"Well, you don't look it, and I sure want you to enjoy yourself. There might not have been any wedding but for you."

"You'd have got your master's berth without me," John said.

"I'm not so sure."

"But that's the one thing you want to be sure about. If you're going to be a ship's master, you've got to know it was always in you to be a master."

"That's what I always wanted to be."

"Then you got what you wanted. In this life, I'm afraid, you get only what you go for—you win your own prizes. If you fail, you pay the penalty you yourself set on failure. When you lose your bearings, the only thing your friends can ever do is set you back on your own course. So you mustn't think I was the one who got you your berth. I was just your pilot out of the inner harbour."

At that moment John was suddenly sure that Judith's dark eyes were looking at him from across the room. His attention was smashed, but he rigidly kept from turning about to meet her gaze.

"Maybe so," the bridegroom was saying. "But I saw the faces of the agents when you took me into their office. Why, they would have given me the vessel outright if you had asked them." The young man's voice seemed very distant, and John had to fix his mind on the words to make their sense.

"I used to be lucky for them, James; that's the sum of it."

"Then you were lucky for me too. I want you to know, sir," he said awkwardly, and John knew that this was to be a speech the young man had rehearsed many times, "I'm going to sail right in your wake. You'll never be ashamed that you spoke for me."

"I know, James, sure enough," Gosnold said, hiding his impatience, but at that moment James's father, Zebulon Reade, joined his son. He was a heavy man, red-faced and bald. For fifty years he had fished and farmed in the seasonal rhythm of the Vineyard men who lived with one foot in the field and the other foot in the surf.

"Well, now, John! You've done my son a favour, do one for me. I want you to run for selectman. The board is going to need a strong chairman."

John smiled slightly and shook his head. "You've got the wrong man. I'm too used to giving my own orders. I wouldn't take kindly to another man's advice, let alone an entire township's. I'm a whalemān, nothing more."

"A lot more, appears to me. You're one of the few men all the different factions would look up to."

"No," said John. "Thank you kindly, but no."

"Well, think it over. You've still got a few weeks."

Still smiling, John shook his head again. Three small boys and a girl had scuffed their way through the grown-ups, giggling hilariously until they bumped into John—then instant respect for his title and legends made them wide-eyed and silent. Their deference caused him to turn and look down at them, wondering wistfully if all children—not only his own—thought of him as a distant man. The children were the first to understand what they saw. They danced back into their game, knowing that they could wrap him around their fingers any time they cared.

He smiled and stood back to let them pass, but the distraction ended when another set of tunes came twanging out of the fiddles. He was tormented by a desire to see whether Judith had joined the dancers, if only with her husband.

Behind him feet slid and stamped so that the whole house trembled. Nobody would have noticed if he had turned to

watch her, but he still fought against the simple happiness that came with merely looking at her from a distance.

Yet if I were dancing, I would see her. I would even be near her, he thought. He despised himself for thinking in subterfuges; and then in the next moment, there he was, bending down to ask his wife for the quadrille.

All that Deborah saw was the devoted husband he wanted desperately to be. He still wished her touch to mean more to him than any other woman's.

Deborah was amply built, the same age that he was, with a strongly formed face and gentle satisfied eyes. She was wearing the dress of grey watered silk he himself had picked out for her in Boston at the end of his final voyage. She wore it without self-consciousness now, though when she first saw it she had said:

"But, John, that's for a woman years younger than I am!"

He had been gone for so many busy years that he had forgotten that the same years had also been passing for her at home five thousand miles away. Now she had become used to seeing herself in the dress while he, in his turn, had come to realize that she had been right in the first place; but this was something he loyally refused to admit. He had so shrewdly masked his determination to adore her as adoration itself that she could not see the loneliness behind his face. When he asked her to dance, she laughed up at him, unwilling to interrupt her conversation with the woman next to her.

"Oh, John, ask someone else. One of the younger people. There's Judith sitting by herself across the room. She's not dancing. Ask her."

For too many years now, he thought, Deborah had been lending him to her friends for those small services which only a man could furnish, as if his masculinity had become an

article of the same casual importance to her as a fan, a pair of gloves, or an embroidery box.

His smile was unchanged, but he bowed with a slightly formal coldness. "Saul is man enough to see that his wife enjoys herself."

He strode away, aware that Deborah was watching him with fond tolerance, a woman amused by the thought of a husband so devoted after all these years that he still cared to dance with no one but herself. He was chilled by the possessiveness in her smile. Though her complacency was his gift to her, the pleasure of such giving had long ago worn thin for him.

In the next moment, as if his most secret wishes were touched with magic, Judith was dancing with him. They swung slowly round and round at arm's length, only their fingers touching in a tight clasp. Zebulon Reade had simply taken him by the elbow and led him over to where she was sitting. Her dark red dress made her throat even whiter, her hair blacker than jet.

"You're not dancing, Captain. Head selectman has to dance, you know. Here's the prettiest woman in the room. Now dance."

Around and around; lightly, gently, as if in a dream. He heard no music and saw no one but her; and of her swaying body and delicate face, he saw nothing but the dark clear eyes which held his gaze with such gentleness that he felt himself telling her everything that was deepest in his heart.

Around and around they went, and the distant music was sweetness. When the dancers stopped, he forced himself to leave her. Her nearness, her touch had satisfied nothing and he was tormented by a dull excitement that could look forward only to frustration day after day for the rest of his life.

At five o'clock some guests prepared to leave. Wrapped in

their cloaks, they called their good-byes. John watched them with relief. In fifteen or twenty minutes he too would be able to escape. Then the front door was opened and a cloud of snow whirled in on a shout of icy wind. A white drift three feet high lay like a barrier on the threshold. A hush moved slowly across the room so that even the fiddlers stopped playing.

Hard winter weather on the Vineyard rarely struck on before January, and then it lingered mildly; but every so often, beginning with an early November storm like this, for six long months the grey air seemed to swarm hour after hour with howling demons ready to cut down anyone who dared rise even for a moment from a crouching posture. Stories from the last such winter almost a decade ago were still fresh, and everyone in the room knew what to expect. Some of them would fall before disease, others would meet accidental deaths from falling trees and from cold. In the swirl of gale-driven snow, men could be hopelessly lost twenty yards from their own barns. Some of the high clay cliffs which bounded the island were going to crumble and thunder unheard into the sea. The white drift on the threshold was like death leaping into their presence, staring at each of them in turn. Zebulon Reade slammed the door shut.

"Guess the party wasn't meant to be over so soon," he said. His humour was out of key and he went on seriously, "Now, all of us here have gone through at least one such winter before. We'll all get through this one too! As for tonight, no one can get through the snow. You will all lay over until tomorrow, so let the fun go on as long as the snow goes on."

Laughter accepted the invitation. A little girl cried because her doll was home all alone, but parents, uncles, and big cousins comforted her. The fiddlers picked up where they had

left off and the dancers resumed their rhythm—as if there had never been that chill moment of warning.

John thought longingly of the cold wind outside that could shock away his restlessness and dismay. He had been in the same room with Judith for far too long a time. How he would manage to get through the evening to come, he did not know. He offered to help Zebulon with the wagons and carriages while the other men, muffled to the chin in their own clothes and their wives' cloaks, went out into the storm to stable and blanket the unsheltered animals. John's request was laughed away.

"I'd be ashamed to let you lift a hand, John. You're our special guest tonight."

"I want to talk about that favour you asked."

"Have you thought it over and changed your mind?"

"Can't do much thinking in a crowd," John said. "Maybe I can do better outside."

Reade laughed. "Come along then. But don't count on doing any chores."

John dressed and stepped out into the seething air that whipped him with snow. Very dimly, near the rear of the house, he could make out the pale glow of moving lanterns. The snow distorted distance so badly that the lights seemed to be miles away.

"What do you want to talk about?" Reade shouted.

"I just wanted some air."

"God Almighty, that's all there is out here! Help yourself!"

The wind was so wild that it numbed his thoughts rather than clarified them; and as soon as Zebulon Reade moved off, there was nothing for John to do. The densely falling snow made him feel even more stifled out here than he had been in the house. After a moment, with nothing resolved, with nothing settled, he returned to the house.

Back in the parlour, he found that the dancing had stopped. Instead, the preparations for putting up twenty guests had become as much of a game as anything that had gone before. The women bustled about on their newly appointed tasks.

Left to himself, John wandered over to the fire. He smoked a cigar, unable to turn a hand to anything while the big house around him resounded with hurried footfalls and excited voices.

As he stood, looking down at the flames, a sweet excitement made him alert, as if a light hand had touched his arm, as if a voice had murmured his name. He stood erect and glanced back over his shoulder.

Judith Pengarth was in the room behind him. They were alone.

She averted her eyes and reached out a hand to adjust the wick of a lamp. Her dark hair and the pallor of her delicate face shone with the glow. Neither the light on the table nor his presence seemed to touch her, but her very composure was disturbing because it could not be real.

Yet why should I think so? he wondered. What makes me so sure?

She reminded him of someone he had known a long time ago, someone hidden from memory behind a veil of his own reticence,

Who is it? he asked longingly. And why can't I remember?

In his lifetime he had loved several women, but there was no one he could recall who looked like Judith. Then why was it that he seemed actually to *know* how his hands would fall on her bare shoulders, how her fingers would caress his hair?

He watched her, but she didn't glance at him. She went quickly to another table. Her body had never been thickened

by childbearing, and she moved with the nervous grace of a young girl.

Since he had come to admit to himself the strength of her tormenting attraction, this was the first time they had ever been alone together for even so brief a period. In the ungovernable part of his imagination where shame had no meaning, there was a stage where two half-mad actors—one who portrayed Judith and one who was himself—persisted in playing out a wanton passion in spite of the angry catcalls from the darkened theatre where John again was the lone and furious spectator.

Over and over the shocking scene was played; each time a little differently and each time John was held in a paralysis that was almost suffocating.

He had dreamed of the moment of being alone with her more often than he could count, but never once had he imagined that when the reality finally came he would simply stand mute.

He waited for her to say something—anything—as long as it would give him a reason to reply. He didn't trust himself to speak and turned, throwing his cigar into the fire. His silence, so prolonged, was becoming more of a confession than the most uncontrolled declaration, and he knew it.

"Nobody expected weather like this," he said at last.

"I know that Saul didn't," she replied. "I heard that you are going to run for selectman. Is that true?"

"Who told you?"

"Saul," she said, and then after an odd pause she added: "Saul finds out everything."

He looked sharply at her averted face, wondering if the repetition of her husband's name meant that she had sensed what was in his heart and that she was pleading with him to remember his best and closest friend. Or perhaps, he thought,

she was desperately reminding herself where her own loyalty lay. Then at last she looked up with that utter serenity which he could swear was only her mask to cover exactly what he himself was feeling.

•“Saul was wrong about the weather,” he said. “It appears he might be wrong about me too. Excuse me, Judith,” he added curtly, and then strode out the nearest door as if impelled by an inner engine for protection.

He found himself in the crowded kitchen, the only one there who had no part in the noisy game of transforming the house into an inn. Everyone seemed to be talking and laughing at once. Even Saul Pengarth, short, coldly elegant, and usually silent, was counting an armful of blankets to everyone’s laughter. He and John had been like brothers ever since they could remember. They had first gone to sea as boys in the same year on the same vessel. Twenty-five years of whaling had given Saul a bleak and wintry expression that disappeared only when he was alone with John or on such rare moments when he was young again with the spirit of fun.

In his hand he held a narrow roll of flannel only a few inches wide. Grasping one end, he let it unroll to its full length so that he had to raise his arm to keep the other end clear of the floor. He gazed solemnly at the length of tape, made a thoughtful face, and then looked around the room for a very tall man.

“Blanket number twelve,” he said abruptly, throwing it on the pile. “For John Gosnold.”

Again there was laughter. A favourite joke of the town was the contrasting heights of the two friends—“The long and short of whaling”—but it was a joke that had been started by Saul himself, and he was the one who kept it alive. John smiled with everyone else, but he alone knew that Saul’s humour was only the bland surface of an iceberg of bitterness. A long time

ago John had noticed that Saul would never let the agents sign on a crew member unless the man stood at least a head taller than himself. Once when asked about it, Saul smiled bleakly and said, "Even so, they're not as big as I am. There's never any question: who's master when I'm aboard!"

Through the laughter now, Saul was looking up at his friend with pale bland eyes. "Where's Judith?" he asked.

"Up forward in the parlour, I think," John said. He spoke with unnatural casualness. "Isn't there anything a man can do to bear a hand here?"

"Here," said someone from behind a pile of sheets that was thrust into his arms. "Take this to Tommy's bedroom."

"And what's the course to Tommy's bedroom?" he asked dryly.

"Just lay aloft and sing out. Five women will answer your hail."

He walked quickly back into the parlour, grateful that his load gave him an excuse for a hasty passage, but the room seemed cooler than when he had left. Judith was not there. His heart fell with dejection, as if a long-awaited holiday had been postponed. God, how he hated these unforeseeable squalls and calms of feeling. Free me, he prayed—free me!

Upstairs he was directed to the room which was said to be "Tommy's," where he carried his load to the lone bedstead. The room was empty and he called out to the women who were bustling about the hall, "Is this where you want it?"

From behind him, a cool voice, strangely quiet in contrast to the excitement running through the house, said, "No, John, on the chest. That bed is to be swung about."

He didn't move. There was no need to turn, for he would have recognized Judith's voice anywhere. When he trusted himself to glance at her, not a gesture, not a tone, not even a hesitant finger betrayed any interest on her part in him.

Then belief turned inside out like a sail brought into the wind. He could have slapped himself for his self-delusion. How he could ever have thought so wildly of cold, barren Judith Pengarth—coolly devoted to her husband because she was unequipped to feel anything else. How close he had come to making a fool of himself below! For if ever he had betrayed the slightest sign of interest to such a woman, she would only have stared at him incredulously and then laughed. Far worse than any laughter at himself, she would also be laughing at Deborah, a disloyalty far more shameful on his part than any adultery. For himself the outright sin would at least have the satanic majesty of passion; the mere mistake was nothing more than a clown's failure.

He left the room abruptly, and now he was no longer the privileged guest to the bustling women below. As soon as he had finished one errand he was sent on another through the gale-shaken house. He accepted his assignments with a show of good humour.

Then miraculously the show of good humour became true good humour, and he was free of her. As suddenly as that. He blinked with amazement. It was unbelievable that he could ever have thought seriously of her—that a man of his experience and station could have suffered one moment of uneasiness because of such a colourless woman.

The entire past few months became increasingly unreal until he found himself up in a draughty attic passage where he had been told to look for a bundle of canvas. As he approached the closet, he saw dimly another figure standing just opposite the one to which he must go. He sensed rather than recognized Judith in the shadow, and his heart twisted at the shock. She was standing with her back to him. The whole past half hour of spurious relief was gone, but he forced himself to continue as if he had seen nothing to make him hesitate. They stood

that way, back to back, for several seconds in silence, each ignoring the other. Only a hand's breadth separated them, but the gap was charged with tension for him.

Voices, footsteps, and laughter were a great distance away. Violin music started again, but as if from a cavern far below the house. Above the pounding of his pulse he could hear her measured breathing, the slight rustle of her dress. Then the sheer effort of remaining motionless so close to her became too great for him, and he let his arms fall to his sides. He had to fight merely to swallow and relieve the agony of his breathlessness.

Then whether he turned first or she did, neither could tell. All he knew was that they were suddenly in each other's arms, kissing with a driven desperation that scorched from his mind everything except the fierce satisfaction that she was grasping him as tightly as he held her, that her lips were as hungrily lifted to his as his mouth pressed down on hers, and that the touch of her yielding body was a millionfold sweeter, more intoxicating, and sadder than was ever dreamed on the shabby stage of his imagination.

In the half-darkness a sound was heard on the stair, and she shoved him away with surprising strength. She stood tense and breathless as her eyes sought his in panic. Then she hurried past him for the ladder-like steps and disappeared below. He waited several minutes before following her.

The festivity in the parlour was as high as it had been before the opened door revealed the storm that was imprisoning them all. He actually had to look about the crowded room before he saw her. She seemed as calm and as cool as ever. For a moment he was bitterly disappointed in her control, and he wondered angrily whether she was so used to such moments in dark corners that she could carry them off as if they were nothing. Then he caught a glimpse of ~~his own~~ face in the

mirror—serious, serene, and thoughtfully good-humoured, as if nothing at all had happened to him either.

He saw Deborah glancing about for him, and he crossed to her; yet behind his face he was still so shaken that he dared not allow himself to think about what had occurred or where it must inevitably lead.

Chapter Two

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SUPPER was laid for twenty people, with the children at a table of their own. The trestled planks sagged with the weight of food—four huge roasted turkeys of russet brown and gold, half a dozen wild ducks, three great kettles of chicken chowder on whose surfaces floated golden islands of melted butter. There were preserves, pickles, berry jellies, wheat bread, and half a dozen pies. From time to time the men would disappear into the storeroom and return with a self-conscious smile on their lips and a tumbler in hand. "Just water," they said with elaborate innocence; but the water was hot, sugared, and tinted gold with rum.

On the Vineyard, weddings were only for the immediate family, quietly done and soon over after ice cream and cookies; but this was an occasion of far greater importance because both the bride and groom had changed their names. Jimmy Reade had been given a vessel, and so now and forevermore he was *Captain* Reade, a member of the elect. At the moment his flushed face was still very much Jimmy's, but John Gosnold knew that the boyishness was going to disappear the moment he stepped aboard ship. No matter how friendly and gentle Jimmy was ashore, Captain James Reade would be somehow different when he took his own vessel to sea.

John had seen hundreds of men transform back and forth from their land selves into their sea selves, and he privately guessed that young Captain Reade would be a harsh but dependable master.

As for John, he himself had ceased long ago to change, and his land face had coalesced with his sea face into one hard profile of authority. Yet he was a passionate man who had hardened only his outer self; and while he still retained the posture and expression of strength, he had the uneasy feeling that he had reached a point where any further burden would crush him. In the back of his mind was the fear that for some time past he had carried his iron control through its last crisis and now he had no further reserves.

Either he had given up the sea in time to save himself from some crushing failure that would surely have happened to him, or else he had needed, far more than he had ever realized, the continual challenge of great dangers to be faced, of hardships to be surmounted, of responsibilities to be borne. Whichever was the case, Zebulon Reade's invitation to run for selectman revived all his vague fears.

His nearest neighbours at the table also asked him about his plans; but although he smiled, his evasions were tantamount to refusal. He felt oppressed by the insistence, and at the moment he wanted to think of nothing but Judith as she moved about the table. He wanted her to meet his gaze and tell him with a glance that the moment of ardour had been neither an accident nor a gesture of coquettishness. Yet she coolly refused to look his way.

In the past hour she had become a mystery to him. If he had been asked: "What sort of woman is Judith Pengarth?" he would have groped helplessly for an answer even though he had known her for years. The Judith he was watching at this moment seemed radiant to him. She made him feel that he had always been in love with every movement, glance, and smile even before he saw her.

Yet how this present shining Judith had emerged from the

colourless everyday woman who was the wife of his closest neighbour and oldest friend, he could not say.

2

Judith Pengarth had been Judith Martyn of Edgartown, the youngest of three sisters. The Pengarth house on North Water Street was large and substantial even for a town where almost a third of the grown men were whaling captains. Judith's father, a thin, dapper man with grey side whiskers and sad intelligent eyes, had been an owner's agent for a good many vessels, and among them was the 310-ton bark, the *Jared B. Cottle*, John Gosnold, Master.

The first time John had seen Judith he was already a veteran whaling captain close to thirty with a wife and two children to support. When he was introduced to her in her father's parlour, she was sitting with her hands folded demurely in her lap, but her dark eyes stared straight ahead with defiance, as if the two older girls in the room had been teasing her before his entrance. Except for her expression, she seemed indistinguishable from her sisters, all with their Spanish black hair parted severely in the centre, with clear direct gaze, all three handsomely dressed in sprigged muslin.

"Captain Gosnold," the eldest of them said with mischievous solemnity, "Judith would like to marry a minister when she grows up."

"That's nice." He glanced at the seated girl and smiled at her slightly. She did not smile back. Her upheld head said she was willing to fight him and the entire world all by herself, but he could not imagine the cause of the secret war.

"She wants to marry a minister so that she can wear beautiful clothes and go to lovely balls."

The three girls had been educated off-island at a young ladies' seminary near Providence, and they had neither the accents nor the airs of country girls.

John said gently, "I didn't know that beautiful clothes and going to lovely balls were in a minister's line of work."

The fifteen-year-old girl held her head slightly higher and she spoke to her sisters without looking at them. "I know that I don't make fun of you when you make a mistake!" Suddenly tears were shining in her eyes, but she did not lower her chin. "You're both mean."

"She means an ambassador kind of minister," the older sister said, laughing. "Imagine having such a heathenish notion of what the word *minister* means!"

"I once met the kind of minister you mean," John said to her.

"You did?" Judith asked cautiously, and looked directly at him for the first time. She didn't know which side he was on, and she was wary.

"But he wasn't at a ball and he wasn't dressed in fancy clothes, I'm afraid. He was a fellow about my age, dressed in a straw hat, a black coat, and wrinkled salt-and-pepper trousers. You see, he was the Minister to Ecuador and he was in a sweat getting me out of a mess with some thieving agents in the port of Guayaquil."

The young girl's eyes were wide and respectful.

"That's right, and people say that you were once in Japan."

Again he laughed. "Not so far in. Only about a mile or so. That's as far as the Japanese soldiers would let me go. And if they had caught me on the beach, I wouldn't have gone beyond it. You know, the soldiers there wear real armour with enamel on it—a girl like you would certainly admire the colours of the lacquer, but I don't think you'd like the faces above it. They're a very fierce-looking people."

"And China?" she asked slowly. "Were you in China?"

"And China too. My, that's an interesting country. You'd like that."

"And were you ever in England?" she asked. "I'm sure I'd love England."

"I was in London once. I saw their Tower and the Parliament. You'd feel at home in England, sure enough. It's dirtier than you see in the pictures."

"And Paris?"

"For a few days. I guess that must be the richest, most beautiful city in the whole world." He laughed. "And I guess you'd be sure to like that too."

"Oh, I would!" she said ardently. Now that she saw he wasn't teasing her, she turned to him for support. "And wouldn't an ambassador be the kind of man to get to go to such places?"

"He would," John agreed. "But here's a plain whaling captain who also got to see them."

"That's so," she admitted thoughtfully. "But then whaling captains don't usually take their wives along, and ambassadors always do." She turned her imperious head to the other girls, and he just barely saw the tip of her tongue stuck out at them. When he laughed aloud, she turned scarlet, but her eyes were as innocent as a child's.

3

On his return to the Vineyard three years later, John's main concern was with his wife and family. He was more surprised than anything else to hear that Saul Pongarth had married the youngest Martyn girl.

That was just after the war, and Saul could have married

anyone he pleased because he was the island's greatest hero. To the Vineyard, the war had not been fought on the land, at Gettysburg or Bull Run, but on the sea between the whalers and the Southern raiders; the whalers unarmed and the warships bristling with cannon. Many Vineyarders were imprisoned and their vessels burned. A few, like John, had lucky escapes. Saul came home covered with glory because one autumn evening, eight hundred and fifty nautical miles south-southwest of the Azores, the brig *Daniel Pease* of Edgartown, Saul Pengarth, Master, was running down-wind through the dusk, picking up her whaleboats after a day of failure. The wind was rising, and all hands had been so intent on staring into the blue dimness ahead that no one noticed that the sails of a tall ship had risen above the horizon behind them and within half an hour was careening along dead astern. Then as the last boat was swung up on deck, the wind itself brought faintly the creak of blocks and taut rigging. Saul turned and saw the enormous barquentine, three times the size of the brig, pressing so aggressively upon him. She had an auxiliary steam engine and smoke gushed from the raked funnel. He gazed stupidly at her and at the strange standard that flew from the truck of the main-topmast. A moment later a voice came roaring through a hand caller, good American English.

"Ahoy, the *Daniel Pease*! Heave to!"

The *Daniel Pease* had been built of oak forty years before, high-sided and full in the beam to withstand any gale, sea, or even the headlong ram of a ninety-foot whale. After three years at sea her bottom was so befouled with sea growth that even with a full sky of wind behind her she might have been able to waddle along at six or seven knots. The strange ship had been doing eleven, and she swept by the brig three full lengths before she slewed around across the whaler's bow and

backed her yards so that she stood in the wind, all her sails, thundering loosely. In the rushing sweep, however, Saul could see that she was a man-of-war, smartly manned and trimmed for action.

"Heave to!" came the shouted command again.

Saul picked up the hand caller and walked slowly down the length of his quarter-deck.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

"The Confederate frigate *Alabama*. Heave to or we shoot. Tell your master to come aboard!" The call was faint but clear.

"Never heard of any *Alabama*. Stand clear of me or I'll ram hell out of you!"

"You damn fool, there's a war on. Captain Semmes gives you thirty seconds to come about."

"Captain *Who*?" Saul called. He was almost abreast of the great ship, less than thirty yards from the open cannon mouths. "*Raphael Semmes*?"

"Captain Raphael Semmes of the Confederate Navy. Fifteen seconds!"

A ten-pounder's black mouth leaped forward a foot into firing position, and a man's voice was saying "*Ready*."

"Let me talk to Captain Semmes." Saul did not come about, but he had the main brailled up without being furled. The sail could be dropped and drawing again in a moment. The *Alabama's* cannon shot out a flag of flame, and a heavy ball screamed through the air where the brig's bowsprit would have been if she hadn't lost way.

Another man stood at the great ship's rail, and after a moment's conference the officer with the caller sang out:

"Is that you, Pengarth? For God's sake, man, heave to!"

The Confederate officer's arrogant refusal to speak directly to Saul only increased his shaking fury as he gripped his own

rail and glared across the deepening dusk. The big ship was falling back almost as fast as the whaler was moving forward, so that talk was fairly easy.

"You fellows seceded?" Saul called.

"We're going to fire again, you fool!"

"Then fire away, you son of a bitch! You fellows don't want to be in the Union with Maine and Pennsylvania, that's all right. But you spent two years in the Edgartown Customs House, Raphael Semmes, and for someone who's been to the Vineyard to go to war with a Vineyard vessel, by God, *that's* treason! Shoot, damn you, I'm going to whale it!"

The brig's mainsail dropped, filled, and the *Daniel Pease* moved ahead. By now they were past the stern of the ship, so that the next volley from the cannon fell into their wake. In the darkness the splash looked like a white fountain. The whalemens could hear orders shouted from the enemy deck as the ship began to wear about, but the rising wind must have loosened a block, for they could hear a sudden wild thunder and flap, and vaguely see a frenzied shaking of white. The *Alabama's* manœuvre was momentarily postponed, and by that time she had disappeared into the night. As soon as she was gone, Saul turned at ninety degrees and ran on a broad reach. The wind rose still more. The night was black and moonless, so that the two vessels could have passed within a hundred yards of each other and neither seen nor heard the other in the roaring darkness. In the morning there was no sail to be seen.

What really tickled the Vineyard, though, was that Saul's remark to Semmes never appeared in his log. Instead, he had made the following laconic entry: *Sept 17, Lat 18N Long 19W. Commences this day clear and glass falling. Sighted whales, but lowered to no purpose. At nightfall strong SE wind. Learned this day of Secession.*

However, even though Saul said nothing, his crew told the story; and the families of the men on the *Ocmulgee* and other lost vessels silently pressed his hand as he walked, lithe as a small steel whip, down Main Street. For a while there was talk of sending him to Congress. There wasn't a girl who would have refused him, and of all the girls he had picked Judith Martyn.

4

When John and Deborah went calling, Saul and the new Mrs. Pengarth were living in Edgartown on Pease's Point Way in a rented house. Saul's coinlike face was without its usual coldness. He was relaxed and smiling shyly, while young Mrs. Pengarth was far different from the spirited girl in her father's parlour. There was nothing girlish or giddy in the quiet way she received her husband's friends. She was no more than eighteen, but she carried herself with gravity. John, however, could not resist teasing her.

"Saul, I didn't know you were going to be made Minister to France," he said gravely. "But I think it's a fine idea."

Saul looked at him blankly. He never liked being puzzled, so for a moment his face was hard.

"Well, if the appointment's still a secret," John went on, "I'm sorry I said anything."

Judith was watching him with a slight smile behind her eyes, but there was colour in her cheeks.

"Captain Gosnold is trying to say——" she said to Saul.

"Saul's wife ought to be calling me John," John said gently.

"Captain John——"

"John," he insisted. "Just plain John."

"Just Plain John is trying to say that my sisters once told him that I wanted to marry an ambassador."

"Now, Judith!" Saul said quietly, but he was amused.

John laughed and spread his hands in surrender. "Just plain John lies dead at your feet, ma'am. I'm glad to see that there's still some sauce back of all that grown-upness."

"I declare, John!" said Deborah. "If you don't stop teasing her, she's going to let you have it again. And I'll help her, too!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Gosnold. Will you have some more tea?"

Once more she was the reserved young Edgartown wife. She showed spirit again only when she mentioned that she would like to start a good island school for young girls, but Saul dismissed the idea. "We'll soon be having such a houseful of our own children, Judith," he said, "there won't be any room for the neighbours' girls to get in."

Deborah immediately glanced at Judith's waist; and Judith, smiling slightly, caught the inspection. She shook her head. "No," she said.

On the long ride home over the plains Deborah remarked to John, "Did you notice the way Saul kept looking at that girl? You'd think she was some rare and fragile porcelain."

"I didn't pay much attention."

"Don't think she doesn't know he feels that way," Deborah replied. "Nor does she like it. It's just too bad she's not in love with him."

"It beats me how you can say such a thing."

"Because I know it. I have eyes in my head if you don't."

"You mean to sit there and say she doesn't love Saul?"

"Yes, I mean to sit here and say she doesn't love Saul."

"And what's the matter with Saul?" he demanded.

"Nothing's the matter with him, except that women don't fall in love with him. I never knew one girl who was in love with Saul. I know that I can't imagine him that way."

"Deborah! Just what in hell do you mean?"

"Don't swear, and you know exactly what I mean," she said, unruffled.

"Deborah!" His mouth was open. "I'm scandalized!"

"You are not," she said calmly. "You're just a big lot of noise."

"Well, you're right," he admitted, laughing quietly. Then he slapped the horse with the rein. "But I can't say that I take to your notion about Saul and women."

5

That autumn Saul started to build the square grey house up-island on the moors, two fields away from the Gosnolds', on Big Oak Hill, where one lone ancient tree stood at the crest—thick in its squat trunk—low and heavy with powerful branches frozen in torment from the incessant winds. From the time when Saul was a boy he had always promised himself that someday the tree would shade his doorstep in the summer and protect him from north-easters in the winter, and finally he had bought the land.

Before there was a roof-raising John went away on a voyage, and for the next three years most of his meagre information about Judith came through Deborah's letters. "It's a shame about poor Judith. A man can sail 5000 mi. around the ocean, and that's all right; but let him go only nine mi. for a wife, and the women hercabouts treat her like a foreigner." Embedded in another letter full of news about the children and neighbours was the remark, "I must say that Judith P. has loads of spunk for the quiet way she stood up to that old witch Sarah Ann Coffin. For all her grand airs, S.A. was made to look like an Irish serving girl. Judith is the finest

kind. Still no children there." Later: "With Mary Manter's help, got Judith elected Pres of Ladies Aid. Her installation address made us all proud. Sarah went around betting that Judith would just spout some poetry, but Jud. spoke straight from the heart. Now, John, are you *sure* about Saul and that business on St. Helena?"

At that point in the letter John stopped in bewilderment. He had been away from the Vineyard for three years and he had received no mail at all for the last seven months. This was being delivered to his hand under a boiling sun in the mid-Pacific, fifteen miles south of the Equator on a flat day of calm. It was good to hear from home, but to be caught up with a question like that . . . He simply shook his head.

To the world, St. Helena meant only one of the islands of Napoleon's exile. To whalemén, St. Helena was one of the main ports of call for supplies in the South Atlantic, an island of flowered beauty and magnificent mountain vistas, all the more lovely and exotic when recalled from the deck of a listlessly leaving ship whose hull was shaggy and green with years of sea growth and barnacles. Then John remembered he had once confided to Deborah that when he and Saul had visited St. Helena at eighteen Saul had been sued on a paternity claim. The young American consul there said to Saul: "It would be all right for you to deny it, but just the same it would sit better if you make a settlement."

Saul was third mate of the *Fairhaven Glory*, a slim boy with pale grey eyes.

"I wasn't going to deny anything," he told the consul. "But I also wasn't going to admit anything either. All I'll allow is: it sure *could* have been me."

The consul, a Vermonter, laughed. "That's talking like a real Yankee. Give the girl ten pounds."

"I'm not that much of a Yankee, mister. I was figuring to give her fifteen, but not a red cent more."

To Deborah, though, the real point of the story had become this: the incident of St. Helena proved that Saul could be a father, therefore it must be Judith who was barren.

John slowly discovered Judith for himself when he returned to the Vineyard three voyages later and finally settled down. He came home for good—a man pretending to himself that he was not exhausted within and without. His eyes were sad with the regret, never put into words, that when he had been twenty he had failed to foresee that the life for which so much was to be sacrificed would be lived by a man of forty who had travelled and lived all over the world, who had spent many more years away from his wife and children than he had spent with them.

Yet everyone at home had grown older too. Deborah was no longer a girl, but a heavyish woman seeming all the more solid because of an inner placidity. She had come to terms with her own life, which could not have been easy, but now it suited her. For a while she had been very shy with him, watching him covertly, so that he too became shy and self-conscious. She was wondering how this tall brown silent man had ever come out of the teasing young captain she had married so long ago. His children were grown and gone from home. When she spoke of them, he felt that they were hers, not his. He was a stranger—nothing and no one were the same.

Judith by this time was almost thirty, and Deborah's closest friend. She too was changed from what she had been twelve years before: but where he had gone through physical hardship, deprivation, and loneliness, her life, so far as any outsider could see, had been serene and comfortable enough. However, she was mostly grave, pale, older than her years,

and whatever she wore, even while she worked, she wore with a quiet fastidiousness that set her apart from the other women. She reminded him of the china porcelain in which Saul took so much pride.

She did not visit too often when John first returned, as if delicacy kept her from intruding on a husband and wife who had been separated for so long. Deborah laughed at her though, and insisted on her coming as freely as she always had. To John, the friendship between them seemed odd because the women were so different. Deborah would bustle about the house in a grey wool dress that was worn at the seams, and her kitchen was always hot with baking. The pies and bread she couldn't use herself were given away to friends or for church and charity sales. She loved visiting just as much as she loved activity at home, and then the grey wool would be set aside for fine silk or cotton, depending on the time of year. Deborah was the able older sister; and Judith went along quietly, accepting advice, admiring, and deeply grateful.

Judith, though, could be two different people. There were times when her face would become radiantly pretty and her eyes would light up as if she had been released into some bright springtime. Then she would move with quick vivacity, and her talk would be gay, flashing with humour. At those moments he found it a delight just to be in the same room with her.

"Hey, Judith, what's come over you?" he said teasingly one day as he looked up from his ledger. "You look like you were walking in the air."

"Ah, that's the way I feel!" She clasped her hands to contain her excitement, and her eyes shone. She laughed. "I suppose it's only the weather."

"The weather? I never saw a greyer day. Why, it's raining fit to float the Ark!"

"Is it?" she said lightly. "Well, it can't be raining everywhere."

"Maybe not in Timbuktu."

"Well, then I'm partial to the weather in Timbuktu!"

He smiled. "I'd believe it if I thought you could spell it."

There was the sound of wheels and harness outside, and John crossed to the window.

"It's Saul," he said, and when he turned back, he was surprised to find that there was no gay young girl in the room with him. In her place was a palely composed, cool young woman.

"Ah well, the visit's over," she said quietly. Her voice was so colourless he would never have sensed the regret unless he had seen the change. "I'd better be getting my things."

When Saul came in, muffled against the weather, his pale grey eyes sought her immediately and with the same expression of pride in her that John had seen on his very first visit to them; but now he saw Saul was also perpetually asking her a question, and John knew intuitively that if the question had been put into words, the words would have been tender and full of despair. John could feel his friend's hurt, and he pitied him.

"I'm ready," said Judith in her quiet, submissive voice.

"Oh, give the man a chance to warm up," Deborah said.

"There's no great rush," Saul added. "I can visit for a minute."

He exchanged a look with his wife, and Judith lowered her eyes.

"Of course," she said quietly, and resumed her seat but did not remove or even loosen her outer clothes. After they left, John stood by the window watching them drive off across the moors.

"Who does she think she is, to feel that way about Saul?"

"I told you the first time I laid eyes on her that she didn't love him," Deborah said.

"Love! She's been married to him for twelve years. Time she got used to the berth. What's she think she's got to complain about?"

"She doesn't complain at all. To hear her tell it, Saul Pengarth is the finest man in the world."

"She sure must tell it in a quiet voice."

"If Saul doesn't complain, why should you? Don't you like her?"

"I like her fine. Only I like Saul too," he said slowly.

He found himself looking forward to her coming. Her mere presence was soothing to him, and he was sure that she was happy in his house, not only because of Deborah, but because of him too.

During the springtime of his first year at home he grew more cheerful and thought of his restless winter as having been only a time of uncertainty while getting used to his new life.

It was a delight to come home on a spring afternoon and find Judith there with Deborah to listen to his news, to have Judith laugh at his mimicry of one of the gossips at the store, to see her face as he told of some trivial local victory. It seemed to him that she understood him more quickly than Deborah did and that was why he addressed her more frequently than he did his wife. He thought it a fine thing that his oldest and best friend Saul should have married someone who was as good a companion to him as her husband was, and he completely ignored the coldness that he had sensed between the Pengarths as unimportant.

One afternoon that summer the two men had gone out together in John's Noman's Land boat, hand-lining for bluefish. The small boat was hove to off Tarpaulin Cove against a smoky south-wester. There was no horizon because the vaporous blue water dissolved into the blue sky, and the wave crests were flecked with sunshine. For several hours they fished silently, just as when they had been small boys. Even the passage across Vineyard Sound had been made in the same way: with John at the helm and Saul at the sheets, as if there had been no intervening twenty-five years of sailing great ships in every ocean of the world.

"We shouldn't be fishing together," Saul said suddenly. He did not look at his friend. "Men our age—we should be out with our sons."

"My son?" John said. He smiled, but the aching unhappiness of the winter suddenly settled down on him. "My boy is chasing bigger fish than blues. Last we heard, he was off Sumatra someplace." He sighed. "I'm sorry for one thing—he never sailed with me; and now that I'm home I'll never hail another vessel for a gam on the chance that my own son might be aboard her. He'll be home next year, though, and if he stays awhile maybe we can get to know each other. Never did have much of a chance before."

"You're talking about a son who's only a stranger to you," Saul said. "I'm talking about a son I never had."

"Well——" John said slowly. He was embarrassed. "You never can tell about those things."

"Oh yes, you can," Saul replied. He pulled in his line, not to play a fish, but to give movement to bitterness. "Maybe it's her, maybe it's me, maybe it's the two of us together. Not

that I'm saying she's not a wonderful woman. I guess I just want too damned much."

"You?"

"Yes, me." For the first time Saul looked at him directly, and for the first time the ice in his eyes was not misleading. "John," he said slowly, "I'm not the easygoing man everybody thinks I am. A long, long time ago I knew what I was like inside, and I was afraid that people might get to know. So I spoke softly and went along under easy sail and got a name for being quiet. But some of my crews know what I'm like, and you do too. I guess you always did."

"What are you trying to tell me, Saul?"

Saul whirled the hook and sinker about his head in a small glistening wheel and then let fly. He waited for the distant splash before answering.

"Nothing," he said grimly. "Nothing. Unless it's just that I don't take kindly to being a disappointed man."

The next time John saw Judith, he looked at her with different eyes. They were good friends by this time, and there was always a light in her face that he was sure was just for him. But now he was aware that there must be a secret violence in her life, a history of swirling scenes of anger, blame, recrimination, and shouted answer. Saul had said that he was not a man who took kindly to disappointment, and Judith could not have easily changed from the high-spirited, joyous girl of her father's house into the quiet woman who hardened into brittle porcelain at the mere sound of her husband's footstep. Yet it was odd that in a community where everybody knew everything about everyone else there was no word of any difference between the man and woman who lived in the large, square, silver-shingled house on the downs. Unless there had been one quarrel long ago so bitter, so unforgivable,

so ferociously conclusive, that there was nothing left afterward for them to say.

As she smiled at him, though, he knew that his pity for her was far greater than his loyalty to Saul. Even if Saul were the one to be pitied, there was still this quality about her that made him think, Perhaps with another man. . . . Then when Deborah left them alone for a moment, he knew that this "other man" with whom Judith might be happy was no vague stranger. In the silence he found himself wondering ruthlessly whether Deborah was sufficiently out of earshot and would remain there long enough so that he could blurt out the words, half plea, half demand, to Judith sitting no more than four feet away from him. At that moment Judith met his gaze, and he could tell that she knew exactly what he was thinking. In the waning afternoon light of the room she didn't move at all; there was no change in her face, but the depth of her sudden perception was so profound that he was the one who was shocked.

For that one instant there was no one else in the room, in the house, in the world, besides themselves; no responsibilities, no ties, nothing that could possibly compare in importance with what he felt for her. Then, like a brilliant bubble, the instant snapped and he was back in the world, face to face with himself, with the enormity he had been willing to risk.

He rose abruptly and clasped his hands, which were trembling.

"It's time," he said, and he was so shaken that his voice sounded harsh and deep. He strode quickly out into the kitchen and took his hat from the peg. Then before leaving the house he stopped and touched his wife's shoulder with unusual tenderness, looking at her, when she turned in pleased surprise, with a desperate plea to recall in him the love he used to feel for her. But Deborah was still unaware that behind his

silence since his return was a changed man, and she returned to her work. He stood there helplessly for a moment and then left the house.

• From that time on he avoided Judith. If she came while he was home, he found an excuse to leave. If he knew that she might be coming, he remained away. When she came with Saul, or when there was no reason at all for him to be out of the room, he treated her with cool politeness and avoided meeting her gaze. He cured himself of nothing. He thought about her all the time, and to keep himself from thinking he worked hard on the farm. The autumn months passed, but it was still the same.

7

He had come to the wedding as if in some way this one afternoon would set him the last test; and if he could get through the few hours that faced him without shaming himself, he could manage for the rest of his life. But the snow had changed everything. He had touched her, kissed her, and now he had the feeling that he neither knew nor understood Judith at all. He watched her with quick hidden glances across the wedding-supper table.

Everyone here knew everyone else so intimately that the least difference from usual behaviour would have been noticed and understood. He could watch her for only moments at a time, and even then he had to sweep the room to be sure he had picked an instant when nobody's eyes were on him. It was exhausting as tacking against head-winds through a narrow, rocky channel.

At length the plain indignity of his position made him rebel. As flatly as he had ever made any decision, he made up

his mind that what had happened between him and Judith was all there ever would be. The choice was always his, and this was going to be his choice.

Very deliberately he turned his attention to the talk that was going on. Saul Pengarth was once again thoughtfully blessing the luck that had allowed men like himself and John to have left the sea now that the great days of whaling were over.

In recent years many things had combined to put an end to the time when the oceans were subdivided into horizon-wide circles of loneliness, in each of which a solitary ship cruised back and forth looking for the telltale signs of feeding whale pods. Just before the war there had been the discovery in Pennsylvania of petroleum oil, smokier but far cheaper than sperm oil; during the war there had been the hundred ruthless sinkings by the Confederate raiders, and then only recently there had been the still further depletion of the New England whaling fleet when over thirty vessels had been icebound and crushed north of Alaska by an early arctic winter. The cost of producing whale oil was too high, and the petroleum people were giving away free patent lamps guaranteed to burn their rock oil with a clean bright flame. The time seemed gone when a young man might return from a three- or four-year whaling voyage with ten to twenty thousand dollars waiting for him as the master's share.

"There was money to be made, all right, but you had to drive to make it," Saul was saying. "I was lucky. There's nothing that's ever going to take the place of *that*!"

The bridegroom was worried. The boy was torn, John could see, between his will to make his fortune and his deep respect for Saul. Even at best, young Captain Reade faced a bitter, lonely life in the ocean emptiness, and John took pity on him.

"It's not all that bad, James," he said. "There will still be

enough wind and whales for you to make your way. There will still be fine horses to buy to drive against Saul and me in Whiting's field. There will still be a big house for you to build, and the day will come, too, when you'll drive your own sons down to Holmes Hole and wave good-bye as they sail away past West Chop."

"James, yes," said Saul in conclusion. "James might still get to be a rich man, but not his boys. I know nobody here agrees with me, but I say it'll be all kerosene by then; and instead of raising Vineyard whalemén, we'll have to settle for pound fishing." His pale eyes smiled. "Besides, the boys aren't even born—nor will they be unless we all say good night."

There was laughter, and the young bride lowered her face, but Saul went up to her and put his arm about her shoulders. "Now, girl," he said gently, "I meant no harm. Folks know I'm the last man on the Vineyard who can afford to make such a joke. Have a dozen sons, child, and God bless you!"

Out of deference John and Deborah had been given a room to themselves. As soon as the door was closed behind them, she looked at him searchingly as she unhooked her dress.

"John, are you worried about anything?"

"No." He was peremptory. He removed his coat and waistcoat. Without turning, he asked, "Why?"

"You hardly ate. You hardly danced."

"Because you didn't want to."

"That never stopped you before."

He was silent.

"John, is it true that you've made up your mind to run for selectman?"

"I don't know that I want to run."

"You'd be head of the town, John."

"I've been head of enough ships in my day. Maybe I've lost my taste for being head of things, Deborah."

"You always used to say that you'd like something like that when you got home and settled down. I wouldn't be surprised if that's what you needed. You've been too inward lately. You *are* worried about something, I can tell."

He sat on the bed and looked at his hands.

"Deborah," he said tentatively, "we've been married a long time."

"Half our lives." Her voice said that she was smiling. He could hear the rustle of her clothes.

He said: "I always used to begin the day's entry in the ship's log with 'Commences this day with—' whatever weather was going. But it should have read, 'Commences this day thinking of Deborah at home with the children.' All I wanted was to get so I could be with you all the time. The nights were the worst. Whether I was below or on deck in the dark, I used to ache for you," he added slowly. He turned and his hand covered her fingers; and then the sunburned, weather-beaten man spoke from the deepest, youngest, least protected part of himself. He blurted out: "Deborah, do you still like me?"

"Like?" She was still with astonishment. "Do I *like* you?"

But in his utter seriousness he was immovable. "*Like*," he insisted. "I've got a notion that you don't want me the way you used to. Not for a long, long time," he said gently. "For a few months or so after I was able to stay at home, yes. But then, slowly, it seemed to go away."

Her smile was haunted by the hope that his words couldn't possibly mean what they had said. She was removing her clothes from beneath a borrowed nightdress. One part of John's mind would have been shocked if she had done any differently, but a far deeper self suddenly knew the convention to be ridiculous and was angered by it. From the very beginning of their marriage he had tolerated this reticence,

hoping that she would come to feel more free with him, but now that he was speaking from his deepest soul, this one unthinking gesture on her part deluged him with a sense of futility.

"What seemed to go away, John?" she said. "I'm your wife. We're not twenty years old any more."

"No," he agreed with sadness. "But I know how I *feel*, not how old I am."

Suddenly her laugh was gentle. "Shame on you, John, for letting the wedding of two children make you so sentimental! Now, get to sleep. Tomorrow we'll be home, and you won't be notional any more. You'll be your old self."

He drew back slowly and then rose. She hadn't seen his urgency, and he doubted now that she ever would. He was imprisoned in an unnamable loneliness, doomed forever by his determination to say nothing to Deborah that might hurt her.

But if he was sparing her feelings, he sensed that he was also condemning her to perpetual banishment from his inner life, for she was already beginning to seem a stranger to him.

That night he slept fitfully, without rest. In his dreams he was a weary fugitive fleeing through a jungle of formless fears, driven by a panic-stricken whisper—Run, run, run! It made no difference in the dreams in which direction he went or what path he took, because the only haven where he might feel safe had been locked forever against him. There was no one to pity him, not even himself. In the dream he believed that his own tears would poison him and disfigure his face and he would die. He was so choked with sobs that unformed cries clotted in his throat, and he ran, frightened, mute, and lost.

Instead of fading with the morning, the dreams seemed more real than ever, while the furtive embrace of the day before was dreamlike and evanescent. He was taut with irritation and told himself that the entire trouble came from being cooped up in the house for so long.

Outside the wind had died completely, and the snowflakes came down like tiny feathers settling in an airless world. The roads were blotted out, and even the boulders on the downs seemed only gentle undulations beneath the unending carpet of white.

He was restless to be outside, but when he reached the kitchen he found that Saul Pengarth and a rescue party had already started out to Barton's on Tea Lane to borrow the big sleigh. No wheels could make any headway on the snow, and a few trips in the sleigh would get everyone home. Three of the younger men had gone with Saul Pengarth.

The men who remained behind had little to do but wait while the women set about restoring the house to order. A new fire had been laid in the parlour and the men gathered there, leaving the kitchen to the women. The men's talk, as usual, turned to whaling; and now that the women were absent, the stories were told without the usual elisions that were made for sensitive ears.

Whale hunters sailed on voyages that lasted for years at a time, and when the South Pacific was the hunting ground, the bays and lagoons of the ocean islands made temporary home ports for watering, gathering fresh stores, and the occasional repairs that were required. Among the men themselves there was no stigma attached to anyone who, either out of desire or loneliness for home, took to himself a woman for the time of his stay. It was not humaneness but necessity that made the

whalemen remain on good terms wherever they stopped, for one could never tell when or where one might be cast ashore by shipwreck. In the Pacific islands trouble came only when merchants and missionaries followed in the wake of the whalemen. But the whalemen had to act with scrupulous fairness, and since they in turn received the same treatment, they behaved like the guests of considerate hosts.

At parting, the native women and half-caste children remained sadly behind but without shame, for the white men had treated them honourably according to the local tribal customs and usually left them well provided. The whalemen sailed half around the world back to the bouldered hills and moors of their white-steepled villages; but they carried with them memories of exotic freedoms and primitive passions—memories that never rested, and rose at moments like this with a poignancy that revealed how deeply buried they had been in the inner weeping silences of reticence and regret.

Halfway through another man's story Gosnold rose abruptly and wandered away, too disturbed to listen any longer. Then he became aware of a quiet behind him, and he realized that he had been asked a question about an old voyage.

"I can't remember," he said to cover the delay in answering. "I'd have to go back to the logbook."

"Well, I have it," said Zebulon Reade. "Stowed away in a locker in the attic."

John turned. "And what are you doing with a log of mine?"

"Why, that was James's first voyage, and you yourself made him a present of the log."

"Did I, now?" John said slowly. "Well, I've a notion I'd like to see it, just for old time's sake."

"Then I'll go fetch it."

"No," said John. "Tell me where it is and I'll go."

He shook his head in trapped annoyance. "A man can sit still for just so long!"

"That's so," agreed Zebulon Reade, laughing. "John, you're like one of those gusty winds that blows from every quarter and can't settle down into a good steady breeze."

"By God, that is the way I feel," said John, and vehemence in itself was a pleasure.

"Trouble is, a farm isn't enough for a man like you—a man used to responsibility. Now, if you was to run——"

John started to reply, but the instinctive words of evasion were brushed aside as another, far more desperate impulse for safety overrode him. "I'll do it!" John said. "So help me, I'll do it!"

He looked at Reade's surprised face and laughed as unexpected relief welled up from deep within him. He was going to make himself far too busy to have the time to think about Judith. On the farm, no matter how quickly his hands might be working, he was always alone, so that his mind had nothing to impede the flow of haunting reverie; on the Town Board he would be pulled outside himself. By shackling himself to a demanding duty, he would actually be making himself free.

"Well, there you have it—I've signed on! Let me get that log, and when I come back you can tell me what course to lay to Town Hall!"

Passing the kitchen, he could hear the airy country voices of the women flowing smoothly down the worn channels of their own gossip. He climbed the stairs, glad for the moment to be by himself and to enjoy his new-found ease of mind.

Up here the house was heavily quiet; but suddenly for him there was an uneasy lack of peace, as if he had caught a barely discernible trace of scent too faint to be recognized but strong

enough to tease, or perhaps he had heard a delicate rustling. Someone else was up here with him, and premonition told him that it was the one person he dreaded most to see. His heart pounded violently. He was breathless, and frightened at the intensity of his excitement simply because it was so delicious to feel this stirring after too many years of feeling nothing at all.

Then he told himself that all this was pure imagination, and to prove it he walked past the closet door and strode to the far end of the corridor where another door stood half open, but his instinct was right. Judith was folding away the last of a pile of quilts into a trunk. She was motionless, frozen in an unfinished movement, so that he knew she had recognized his step. On her face was the sick dread that matched the longing in his own heart. They stood facing each other helplessly for a moment of depthless insight. He closed the door behind him.

"Judith," he said in a low swift voice. "It's time for plain talking——"

She shook her head in mute warning and then found her voice.

"The door," she said. "For God's sake, open that door!"

But he determined to exorcise what haunted them both by squeezing it into ordinary words, so that what was said aloud, however bluntly, would become the truth they would both remember, while the sweetness that could not be uttered would be lost forever.

"The whole thing is my fault," he said. "Better than anyone, I know how wrong it is. This itch——" Her eyes widened and her lips parted in protest against the tawdriness he was thrusting on her. "Ah, Judith, I'm so sorry!"

Without realizing the intimacy of the gesture, he put his hand on her wrist. But whether he willed it or not, possessiveness was in his fingers, and at his touch her arm moved closer to

him. In the next moment there was an explosive compounding of silent passion between them that whirled them up the steps of intimacy with such dizzying speed that the world and its law were turned inside out.

Yet one tiny clear corner of his mind was still watchful and perceptive, sardonically noting that only a man married as long as himself could so swiftly chart a course for hands through fold upon fold of silk, flounce, and jersey to the warm, living flesh beneath. Then the irony fled, torn away like skysail in a gale; and the watchful intelligence next noted with a thrusting astonishment that she was almost virginal and had never before been awakened. The single staring eye watched the mask of her face as, impaled by ecstasy, she responded with such passion that he suddenly burst into a forbidden memory and recalled whose image she had evoked; but only for an instant, because the single eye fluttered and became sightless and mindless—deluged beneath a wave of pure sensation more intense than he had ever known before.

In the next moment they stood facing each other, hardly dishevelled but breathless, flushed, trembling and shaken, too stunned by the terrifying quickness with which everything had happened to be able to face its enormity. But her eyes in her appalled face showed the awed wonder for what he had been capable of making her feel. The experience was still echoing within her.

He had no idea how long they had been there, but the whole thing could not have taken more than a few minutes. Pure habit put him in command. He led her from the darkness to the pale grey of the window light and examined her quickly.

"Fix your dress," he said. "The side of the hem is caught a little. And some of your curls," he added, touching her hair, not with tenderness, but simply to show her where he meant.

He waited until she had done as she had been told. The

stunned look was still on her face, but he was aware of it only distantly. Behind his appearance of alertness he was staring at the wreckage he had made of everything he believed, for he had broken every law by which he had long ago determined to live—fidelity, friendship—every law but murder, and even then he had killed a lifelong image of himself. Yet he could find no trace of an impulse to have the moment unlived.

"I'll get what I came for," he said. "Give me a few minutes before you come after me."

At the door he glanced back. Her head was bowed, and her hands were at her face.

"Oh, my God!" she murmured.

There was no time to comfort her. The new course had been set and he strode out into the attic corridor, his face grave, his eyes level, and his heart on fire. He had only deepened his desire. The memory of her in passion was still with him, and as he walked away he knew that he could have gone back and taken her all over again.

Chapter Three

1

SLEIGH bells and men's shouts broke the silence outside as the relief party arrived. The men came stamping into the kitchen, their faces red and triumphant.

"How's it out?"

"Colder than a witch's teat. Can't see anything but white anywhere you look. Folks he-re ready to go?"

The women came downstairs with laughing regret now that the stay was over. Judith was among them, smiling too, although to John her face looked drawn. He turned away before he could meet her glance. He didn't know what to say to her or even what he would have liked to have her tell him. Each moment of the milling departure was an effort of his will.

"Remember," said Zebulon as they shook hands, "I've got your promise."

John looked at him, wondering for a moment what the man was talking about.

"So you have," he said absently. "So you have."

"I'll be over tomorrow," said Zebulon. "We'll bind the bargain."

At last the sleigh was filled and farewells said. As they slid away, his relief at being rid of the burden of Judith's presence was even greater than his regret at leaving her.

He silently helped Deborah down before their own steps and opened the door for her into the still, silent cold of a house which had been without a fire almost twenty-four

hours. For John the chill was even deeper—as if everything had gone dead for him in this house which had been the ambition of the earliest years of his married life.

2

The house had been built for him when he was in his early twenties and already a man of means who wore fine clothes, smoked clear Havanas, and had behind him two successful whaling voyages which had made his reputation as one of the luckiest whaling masters in New England. In those days he wanted to do everything in style because he enjoyed Deborah's dazzled excitement.

The steam packet *Island Queen* had been chartered to take them to New Bedford and then lay over to carry back their new furnishings. Forty passengers had to find other means of transportation.

"My land," Deborah had laughed. They stood alone in august privacy on the packet's foredeck as the vessel left the Vineyard on the shopping expedition. "I'm the *Island Queen*!"

Deeply in love, they held hands all the way across the sound. In the New Bedford stores he had stood behind Deborah with the casual elegance that belonged only to very young men with money in their pockets. Mr. Corcoran of Corcoran and Smith showed his best wares.

"Suit you, Captain?" he would ask deferentially.

"If it suits the lady, Mr. Corcoran. She's the one who's going to live with it."

"But everything's so expensive!" Deborah said, turning to him with glory in her eyes. She was stunned by her lover's magnificence.

"You buy what you like. All I want is for the house to be handsome so that when I come home I'm going to damn well *know* that I'm home!"

He and Deborah had stood in the bow all the way back across Buzzards Bay and up Vineyard Sound along Naushon opposite the green, shaggy cliffs of Makonikey. She was silent and he was in his glory because at twenty-one life had to be conquered only once. The fairy tales all promised that, once crowned, kings and queens ruled forever hand in hand.

This was the house, then, that was the dream of a young man in his early twenties. From the time it was built, every promise he had ever made himself had been fulfilled. He was two years at sea when he learned that he had a fifteen-month-old boy waiting for him at home. The boy's name was Peter.

"That's a fine name," said the captain who had handed him the letter.

"Did you see him?" John asked eagerly.

"Fine boy, sure enough."

"Who does he look like?"

The other master was a much older man than John, but he studied John very seriously over the tumbler of whiskey.

"Well, it's over a year since I saw him," he drawled, "but I'd be inclined to say he favoured you—around the eyes. Yes, sir, around the eyes."

The story was told all over the whaling grounds how John Gosnold expected another man to remember what a three-month-old infant looked like. When John cast anchor for summer whaling off the Russian port of Kamchatka, a Stonington skipper called across the water: "Hear you got a boy who resembles you around the ears!"

John laughed, pleased at the good-natured teasing that followed him over thousands of miles. "You never saw a better-looking pair!"

"Damned if I ever noticed, Cap'n!"

When he got home, he saw a quick dark boy of two who looked at him shyly and then hid behind his mother's skirts. John gently moved Deborah aside until he faced his son again.

"Hello there, you boy," he said with awkward gentleness. "Do you know who I am?"

The small head nodded, but the boy sidled out of sight once more. John looked up helplessly to see Deborah's pity.

"Give him a little time, John," she said softly.

Weeks passed before the boy would sit in his father's lap, but then after that he wouldn't leave his father for a moment all that lovely summer.

For three years at sea John kept remembering the warmth of the small hand holding on to his fingers, the small figure walking along beside him on the Vineyard paths; but when he returned home there was no such little boy to meet him. He never saw that child again. In his place John found a thin lad, twice the lost child's size, who looked up at him as if he were a stranger; and standing beside the boy, holding on to his hand, was a two-year-old blonde girl. This was Esther, after John's mother, and there wasn't a shy bone in her body.

She laughed happily when he swung her upon his shoulders, and the five-year-old boy watched with a dark and distant gravity as his little sister played with his father. It took a long, long time that year for John to make friends with his son.

The years passed, and each time John came home to children he scarcely recognized, he had to surrender the memory of the smaller children he had been carrying with him. It was as if his own children were always dying and he had to learn to love the new ones he found. Homecoming was always a little mournful for him.

After a while he became reconciled to the fact that he would never again regain his son's selfless love. The dark boy treated him with respect, gave quick deference to his wishes, but never admitted him into the warmth of impulsive confidence. And Esther, who had once come to him so easily, just as easily found another world which had neither room nor need for a father. She would chat gaily with her mother directly across his silent presence, citing names he had never heard before, remembering incidents he had never been told about.

"You've grown up so fast!" he exclaimed to Esther when she was almost fourteen. "So very fast!"

"No faster than the other girls," she laughed. "It's taking me the same million years before Mama will let me put my hair up. You know, you've only seen me four times in my whole life. Four times, that's all! I'll never marry a whaling master, or anyone else who goes away to sea!"

"I guess I feel closer to them—and they to me—when I'm away than I do when I'm at home," he said to Deborah; and he himself didn't realize how much regret he was hiding behind his words until he saw the quick perception in Deborah's eyes.

Things aren't turning out right, he wanted to say. And I don't know where they started going wrong!

But whenever he was saddened because he didn't know his children too well during those years, he cheered himself with the thought that a time was coming when he could retire from the sea and settle down with his family about him. When he was twenty-one, he had set as his goal a sum that would make him moderately rich for life; and he crowded his luck to make each voyage earn its portion.

Only rarely did he have the sudden helpless panic that his life was being spent in anticipation of days to come; never in

enjoyment of the present that was sliding past so rapidly, so subtly beyond recall.

He was just past forty when the goal was finally reached. But Peter was already away on his first whaling voyage. Years might pass before his return. On the mantelpiece of the front parlour was a picture of Peter taken just before he sailed. The two-year-old boy, the ten-year-old lad, the youth of thirteen were all gone forever. John stood alone on a winter's day and realized that now he would never really know his son except when Peter, too, would be too old to go to sea. Then two men—one elderly, the other middle-aged—would sit together and try shyly to realize that they ought to be each other's closest friends.

Esther was living in Edgartown, a complacent young matron married to a man ten years older than herself, pleased to see her parents occasionally, but so full of her own busy life that she would have been startled if John had ever tried to reclaim the little girl whose entire growing up he had missed except for a few months scattered through the years. He sat in her parlour and watched her bustle about, but she was so used to being fatherless that she didn't know what was in his mind. He sighed and rose and then returned only when he was invited.

Deborah had changed most of all. For a while on his return they had been lovers, but the ironic fact, John realized, was that they were subject to all the boredoms and satiations of a couple who have been married for twenty years even though the total sum of their lives together had been one-tenth of that.

Little by little it dawned on him, that first winter at home, that he was a man of forty trapped into a way of living that had been laid out for him by a lad of twenty who had seen too little of the world, knew too little of the human heart, and

presumed without question that nothing would ever change.

Whenever John thought of how much less he was getting out of life than he had worked for, he stifled his disappointment with the reflection that he still possessed so much more than his fellow men. Yet he was wild with restlessness, haunted by the intuitive knowledge that a man's entire happiness depended on what he could deeply feel, not on what he possessed.

3

After returning home from the snowbound wedding, what had seemed a busy life suddenly appeared thin and unsatisfying. However disastrous, at least that one outburst of passion with Judith had been darkly glorious; for not since he was eighteen years old had he known such Dionysiac joy.

He had been first mate aboard the brig *Somerset Queen* when the great typhoon of '52 left her with the foremast in splinters, all her forward rigging a shambles, her copper bottom peeling away from where the hull had been torn by the jettisoned mast. Fortunately they were only a hundred and fifty-five miles due east of the Margrave Islands, and they limped westward over a brilliant blue ocean, raising Hakeete, the outermost, within thirty-six hours. The island was a lush green fringe floating on the sea and crowned by hovering clouds. There it was necessary to beach the vessel between two sturdy trees so that tackle could be secured from the tree trunks to the masts and the ship hove down on the white sand for hull repairs. Also, a new mast of native timber would have to be stepped—together a task that would require several months.

The whalemén rigged their own shelter from spare spars and canvas immediately adjoining the village of the natives, a

handsome light-skinned people who were most hospitable. One by one the seamen began to disappear from the encampment at night to steal back to work the following morning at the improvised shipyard. Almost half the men took up with girls from the native village. The captain wisely kept his own counsel; he cared only that the work get done, and ship discipline was kept only at work.

Gosnold found that he had been singled out by a pretty, vivacious girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen. She was slenderly built, and her long black hair curled away from a broad babyish forehead. Her glances were demure, but her attitude was proprietary and she had a sharp temper which flared whenever she thought one of her kinswomen was trying to poach on what she had decided was her property. She sat on the ground and watched him for hours. Gosnold was amused and flattered and casually allowed himself to consummate the girl's desire. Her wildness in passion was a revelation to him; and now, much more interested, he moved his own gear in with her family. He was as shy with her parents and grandparents—her grandfather was the chief—as if they had been the folks of a girl back home, but they gravely consented to his presence and allowed the young couple to build their own hut. It was almost like playing house. She cooked for him and cleaned his clothes, acting the little housewife with such seriousness that he was moved to delighted laughter, just as she was when he was learning to speak her language. At night when it was too dark to work they swam by moonlight in the clear star-shimmering pools and made love wherever desire caught them.

He was deeply attached to her. He was thrilled by her voice, by the love in her eyes, by the way she twined herself around him, as if she were always seeking new ways to touch his body with hers in as many places at once as possible. That

she would someday do the same thing with another man after he was gone made his heart ache with jealousy, and he began to hate his ship, his home—everything that would be taking him away from her. In cooler moments, though, he remembered all the things that older hands had told him, and even his own brief experience seemed to bear it out. He had been in love before, although never like this; but if mild love could eventually die, so would wild love.

Yet as the time drew on for farewells, he found that, while love must eventually die, at this particular moment it was very much alive. When he bent to embrace her for the last time, he found himself whispering with fierce insistence, "I'll be back. Wait for me!" The brig rode out with the tide, and both the vessel's rail and the white beach were lined with figures waving to each other. Gosnold ached with sadness.

The next morning the master and his mate discovered that two of the forecabin hands had fled the ship the night before in a gig. They were both very young and apparently they could not stand the wrenching loss of their sweethearts. The captain had been tolerant ashore, but he was furious now and ordered the ship to wear about.

"Well, mister, here's a pretty fix!" he said to his young mate. "And I can't say you set anyone a good example of Christian decency!"

Gosnold was silent for a moment. "Can't say I blame them, sir."

"*Blame them!*" shouted the master. "By God, they'll wish they'd been born eunuchs by the time I get through with them! *Blame them*, he says! Well, if you can't blame them, mister, you'll damn well catch them. I'm going to stand half a mile off the lee shore, and you'll go in with a party of six in a whaleboat. You'll go armed, and you'll bring back my two hands or their corpses. Blame them, by God!"

A whaling master sailed without orders except to catch whales, and he needed no orders because he had unlimited rights. He could trade or sell his cargo as he saw fit. He could even mortgage the vessel or sell it as he pleased and the owner had to stand by his signature. He was the owner at sea. He was also the United States Government, but he had no right to inflict a sentence of death. He carried irons aboard to bind men until they stood trial on land; but, like a law officer, he did have the right to shoot, or cause to have shot, a man resisting arrest. John was his deputy, and while he burned with sudden hatred for the master, he had no choice but to obey.

Once again the island appeared from beneath the ring of soft white cloud, and once again the shore was lined with waving people. As the whaleboat approached the line of white breakers, the waving grew more and more frenzied, and a dozen figures ran splashing into the surf to help the boat in. The minute Gosnold stepped into the foaming wash he was tightly embraced and his face covered with tears and kisses.

"I knew you'd come back," she sobbed. "When you first promised, my heart ached for your lie. But when the two men came back this morning, then I knew you were all going to return. I love you. I love you."

He looked down helplessly and said, "I must speak to your grandfather."

His strained voice made her glance an unspoken question. She slowly disengaged herself from him and followed the party to where the old chieftain stood.

"Where are my brothers, Grandfather?" Gosnold asked. "We cannot stay."

The chieftain, a placid man of sixty, said calmly, "We are sorry you must go. But your brothers wish to remain at home."

"Their home is on our vessel, Grandfather."

"Do they have their families on your vessel?"

"There is no room for families on our vessel. But they have families across the ocean where they were born."

The chieftain shook his head and smiled a little.

"Your brothers do not want those families any more. They want their families here. They are now my grandsons—just as you are my grandson," he added politely, but his face was grave. "You may have the boat in which they came, if you want, but you cannot have my grandsons." He glanced at the rifle on John's back. "Even if you use that."

Without a word in reply John turned and walked back down the beach. From the corner of his eye he saw the crumpled girl sobbing helplessly on the sand, which clung to her face and hair. He was so beset by a pain that was shame and longing for her that he wished to die, but with dry eyes and dry throat he directed two men to secure the gig. The whaleboat set out over the surf once more, without help this time from the silent watchers, and after a while came within hail of the brig.

"Have you got those two bastards?" called the master.

"We got the gig, sir."

"To hell with the gig! Go back and get the men."

"If we go back, you'll be missing nine men instead of two!"

The open defiance, the flat threat of desertion could mean imprisonment: at the very least it could mean John's papers. The canvas of the loose sails slatted and boomed against the mast and stays. Then apparently the captain decided to misinterpret John's threat to mean that the natives would kill any landing party. Slowly he lowered the rifle which he had held to discourage any other man who might be thinking of deserting ship.

"Come aboard," he said.

For a long time, every night brought John the same dream: that he was just waking in the palm hut with his cheek pressed against her shoulder. Then the sleeping girl stirred, and he expected her to turn in his arms, as she always did, to press herself to him for the last few minutes before arising. But when her face came around to his, he saw her tear-shattered eyes so full of hurt that he became mute with the horror of her misunderstanding. He struggled for speech, for explanation, and his throat locked all the more tightly with tears, so that the dream swirled into nightmare and he had to fight himself awake.

Then, curiously, the dream ceased, and after having suffered so much for the girl she disappeared completely from his memory along with the entire adventure, so that years later when men spoke of the havoc of the great typhoon he had no story to tell. He could vaguely recall some damage to the ship on which he had been serving, but nothing that could have been very serious.

Not until he and Judith had burst with such violence into intimacy was he deluged by the returning memory with every detail of sight, sound, sweetness, and anguish.

Yet the memory could never have been completely lost, because he saw now that the adventure with the girl had determined the course of his entire life. He had resolved that such unbearable unhappiness would never happen to him again. Those few months on the island had been the sweetest, happiest time of his life; and he would recapture all that with some girl at home who could never be taken away from him.

But love eventually died.

Well, it would not be that way for him.

He would treasure his love, pamper it, make it accept every

slight without resentment. And more than anything, he would never look at any other woman, because he knew by then that the taste of one always blurred the memories of those who had come before her. His decisions had never been put squarely into words, and when he had first fallen in love with Deborah, he had said to himself that she was exactly what he wanted and that he would always be a good husband to her.

Now, in all honesty, he realized that his fear of loving Judith stemmed only in part from any sense of wrongdoing, strong as that might be; what had really terrified him was that she could make him forget Deborah, particularly now that his early ardour for her was gone.

Once he reached the dreaded point of feeling nothing for Deborah, then he would be empty forever, and the life he had worked so hard to attain would be nothing but a dull routine of movement in sunshine and shadows—a puppet's parade through endless days to achieve nothing but the passage of time until he would die.

In a sense he had lived for twenty-five years on the lessons he had learned from a few months with a sixteen-year-old girl. His way of living, his standards, and his ambitions had been a way of keeping faith with her; and only at the moment when he had violated every promise he had made on her account was he able to recall her so vividly. What had attracted him to Judith in the first place was his unerring recognition that she possessed within her the same wild abandon to the moment of passion.

For days after the wedding party she filled his thoughts completely, then one morning his long reverie was interrupted by a party of men who came stamping into the house, blinking after the brilliance of the morning sun on the snow. Apparently they had come as a deputation, because their faces were unusually solemn as they removed their scarves and greatcoats. Zebulon Reade was their leader. They grouped themselves around the front parlour, each one scrupulously keeping silent until Zebulon should speak. John sat in his big armchair, and he too waited to be addressed.

"Well, John," Zebulon said at last, "guess you know why we've come."

"I'd be surer if I heard you say it."

The exchange of cautious feelers met everyone's approval, and Zebulon smiled.

"All right, John, you said you'd run for selectman. On behalf of these men gathered here and myself, I'm going to ask you all over again—sort of public and formal now. Will you run for selectman of this town at the next town meeting to be held two weeks from now?"

John took a long breath and looked down at his hands.

"I'll stand by what I said, Zebulon," he said slowly. "Don't know as I'm eager, but if I said it, I'll do it."

"As for being eager, John, that's your own business. Selectman is the biggest thing this town has to offer, and we don't have to apologize for it."

"Didn't mean it that way, Zebulon. You know that. It's a big honour, sure enough. My being eager has to do with can I do it? There's strong feeling around about the fishing rights. However it gets decided, somebody's going to be hurt."

"How it gets decided will be up to town meeting, not to

you. As selectman, you simply carry out the town's will. You're being asked just because you're a big enough man to do what's fair and right."

"I'm not afraid of not being fair," John said slowly. "I trust my own judgment."

"We're not here to beg you, John. A big change has got to be made in the way this town goes fishing. The man to do it has to be willing to shoulder his part of the burden. Are you willing, John?"

"Yes," he said after a moment, "I'm willing."

"And two weeks from tonight, when your name is called in town meeting, you'll stand up—if elected—and accept the office?"

"I'll stand up."

Zebulon Reade glanced at the men behind him and they nodded in return, satisfied that John had spelled out his promise backward and forward.

"All right," he said, turning back to John. "You'll be elected."

They left soon after, and with them went his preoccupation with Judith. But he had been fooled by himself this way before, and he so deeply dreaded her full return that he rose immediately and sought the daily round of chores and duties to draw him back into the semblance of routine.

His working day began at breakfast, when the kitchen door would be opened from the outside as if Billy Bascom had been standing on the step, waiting for the exact moment when John would raise his first cup of coffee.

"Morning, John," the withered old man would say, standing in the doorway with his hat in his hands.

"Morning, Mr. Bascom."

On some days the downs beyond the kitchen door were summer green and gold in the soft morning sun, and the great

boulders were denign with lichen. Or the early day behind the silhouetted figure might have the smoky brilliance of autumn. In the springtime a delicate mist of buds seemed to hover just above the ground, suffusing the bayberry bushes, or at any season a thick white sea fog could have blotted everything from view. Billy Bascom brought it all into the house with him and told it in his tone. Then John would nod and say: "Coffee, Mr. Bascom?"

The old man would think for a moment before his grave reply: "Don't mind if I do, John."

So began each day. John's father, a generation closer to the old man, had called the Indian Billy, as became men who were almost contemporaries. No such familiarity had been permitted John as a boy, and he had been saying "Morning, Mr. Bascom," for almost forty years. After the coffee the two men would go out to the barn to decide what had to be done for the day. The farm was like a ship, having to be repaired and rebuilt as it went along. After the barn came the walk out to the sheep, to be greeted by the barking of Old Wash, whose odour was as musty as any ram's.

Before John's return to the house and his accounts, there was always the stop at Bascom's small cottage of weathered shingle. Mrs. Bascom had once been a Kentucky slave who had gone mad with despair and fled north when her husband and two small children had been sold away from her. Still moaning to herself like a stricken animal, she had been landed one night in the harbour of Menemsha on the Vineyard by some New Bedford Abolitionists. Another runaway slave led her up to the cliffs of Gay Head, where the Indians took her in. Eventually Billy had married the unhappy woman and nursed her back to calmness, although no one had ever heard her mention her first family. She seemed not to know that she had ever in her life been off-island. They had a son named

Silvanus, who had been John's playmate and later his harpooner, each boy following the Vineyard traditions for his separate race within the single tradition of whaling. But in Silvanus's thirty-seventh year he had been dragged overboard by a fouled line paying out after a maddened whale—whisked out of sight and forty fathoms down within the time of a single breath. There wasn't even a bubble to mark his grave. Within an hour after the news of his horrible death his mother was acting as if she had never been told, for she moved about her sunny cottage on the downs, humming to herself quite cheerfully.

At John's daily appearances her eyes lit up.

"Any news of Silvanus?" she asked each morning, although her son was now eight years dead.

"Letter last week, Mrs. Bascom. A schooner out of Fairhaven met them off the Galápagos. Silvanus is just fine."

"But he never dresses warm enough. You got to be after him all the time, that boy. And he don't listen to me. Will you write to him?"

"I did, Mrs. Bascom. You know I always write."

"Yes, you do, John. You're a good boy. Always was. Like some nice hot coffee?"

"Don't mind if I do," he'd say, and they would all sit down together, because John had promised his dying father that he would always see that there were day chores for Mr. Bascom and that he would be nice to that poor wife of his.

John always left the Bascoms' cottage by himself.

This particular day was gusty with hard sunshine. Scudding cloud shadows raced south-east across the hills and moors and then out upon the blue water. He watched a flight of wild geese, like a shaftless arrowhead, speed above him, but the thunder of their passage was lost on the wind.

He paused on the slope and shaded his eyes to the south-

west, trying to recognize familiar sails on the blue of Vineyard Sound. Across the rolling hills nearby stood the lone great oak tree and the grey square house of the Pengarths. Smoke from the chimneys told of fires before which Judith warmed herself. The pale windows were great unblinking eyes through which Judith might be seeing him as he stood there, but in the two weeks since the wedding he had caught no glimpse of her.

The distant house seemed aloof, secretive, and self-contained. Dark thoughts tormented him. Perhaps she had forgotten. Perhaps the house was whispering with the smothered laughter of rekindled lovers, and the longings which he had aroused in her during that brief hot spasm in the dark attic room were being satisfied now by Saul. Why not? Human passion was a queer and wayward thing.

After all, thought John, what did he really know about her? The outward everyday aspect that everyone knew, he too had known. But because he now knew very much more, there might be other depths that were still hidden from him as completely as she herself was hidden within the grey house across the downs.

Down in a small fold between the hills a movement of bright colour caught John's eye. The scarlet and grey moved again. Judith was gathering black alder in a cluster of bush. Out here in the rolling emptiness of the downs, on this bright day—this could be where they might talk to each other in normal voices, look at each other's face, smile, perhaps touch each other with tenderness and find once more the human dignity that had been lost in their snatched moment when they had been like creatures in flight.

Yet he remained motionless against the urging winds of the air and the beseeching need of his heart. He was chilled by a prescience of doom. If he should go down the slope, once again there would be no limit to the nearness between them, and if

self-denial was difficult now, how much more helpless would they be when they grew used to each other?

In the moment of hesitation he knew that there would never be any privacy. Standing here, he could be seen both from his own house and from Pengarth's. There was nothing unusual in the sight of John Gosnold standing alone on the downs; but if Saul, in the firelit gloom of his study, had noticed that his wife had only a short time before gone down into the valley, then John Gosnold a moment later going down the same slope, no matter how casually, was John Gosnold walking out of sight to Judith Pengarth.

Yet even though he knew that he must not go down to her, he was unable to leave until she had seen him. Longingly and in farewell he stared down at her, with all his soul willing her to glance up—to see him and somehow divine the sadness in his mind.

The moments passed; then suddenly their glances met and the impact of understanding even across the distance was pure intimacy. She stood as motionless as he; but John forced himself slowly to turn and walk away along the crest toward the ocean cliffs, with the most secret part of his heart praying that she would follow and call his name, for he knew that he would not resist her.

The brush and dry turf crackled against his ankles, the wind moaned in his ears, yet he was so alert that he could have heard even the whisper of her voice, but she was silent.

When he returned some hours later with a brace of geese which he had shot, the warm kitchen odours closed in on him and brought the pungency of tobacco. Recognition of the scent made him as wary as if he had been caught red-handed in guilt.

Deborah watched his movements as he took off his rough coat. He was a strong man, and from the beginning she had been attracted to him because he had as much grace as he had strength. Years before they had been married she once told a friend that he was the only man she knew whom she could imagine fighting with a sword without looking like a big clumsy fool. Now his face was dark with the wind; and though she was irritated with him, she also felt an immeasurable pity because the strength and grace were blurred with an exhaustion which she sensed was deeper than she could fathom.

"Saul Pengarth was here," she said. "He waited for you more than two hours."

"What for?" John asked. He looked at her searchingly. "Did he say?"

"He wants to go on with that old lawsuit about the down-island land you own with him. He says you both have a few thousand dollars coming to you."

"If we win, we do. Our claim isn't too strong. Let him come over again and we'll talk about it."

He started to turn away, but she held him with her voice.

"He's expecting you at his house. After all, he waited some time for you."

John hesitated, and his frown deepened around the thoughts that he was so desperately withholding from her. She felt her jaw tighten with exasperation.

"Tonight's town meeting," he said. "I can't see him tonight."

"Then go on over right now. There's plenty of time."

He glanced at her, and she could not imagine what she had said or implied that could make him look almost frightened

and then a moment later grim with decision—a decision that was causing him deep pain.

Talk to me, she wanted to cry out. Tell me what it is that's burning inside you!

But he was shaking his head. "I won't go over," he said. "I'm not in that much of a hurry. Saul's the one with the taste for going to law."

"John." Now she was direct with him. "Are you angry with Saul?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because Saul himself asked why you have been avoiding his house."

"Saul's skin is too thin." He set the wild birds down on the table, moving angrily, beset by unfair accusations. "It's not that at all."

"But then it *is* something?" she persisted. "Are you angry with me?"

He looked at her in amazement. "You? Why you?"

"That's what I want to know. For two weeks now you've been downright miserable. Is there something you want to say?" She hesitated. "Do you want to go back to sea?"

"No."

The next question was even more painful for her. From the beginning, she knew, he had been more ardent than she. Other women sometimes complained that their husbands never used the words of love, but John had always been the one who was most tenderly outspoken, while she had been easygoing and receptive. Maybe he had been so free in telling her of his deepest feelings out of a need to hear her say the same kind of thing to him; and perhaps, she reluctantly admitted, she had rebuffed him too often. She had been brought up not to talk about her feelings, and now she found it almost impossible to put them into words to be said aloud.

"Is it——" She faltered. "Is it what you started to talk to me about on the night of the wedding? About——"

His frown deepened, becoming almost fierce with pity for her; then his gaze grew soft and wistful and she knew that he was on the point of blurting out to her everything that was in his heart, as if she were the one person in whose hands he could trust himself, the one haven where he could find understanding.

Then before her eyes the impulse died within him, and when he spoke that death was in his voice.

"It's nothing, Deborah, just plain nothing. What I said to you that time——" He shook his head slowly. "Forget it. As for Saul—I'll go over there tonight on my way to Town Hall and talk to him for a minute or two. But that's all!"

He turned away and left the room; and she knew that the deep reticence was still between them.

Chapter Four

1

AFTER a silent supper John asked Deborah for a kettle of hot water. He shaved, put on a clean shirt, and brushed his hair, telling himself that all this care was not for the visit he was so reluctant to make, but only for town meeting.

The wind that had blown aⁿ afternoon had died, and now over the rolling downs there was a great cloud of cumulus that had drifted down from the sky to rest on the earth. Through the milky vapour a full moon's brilliance gleamed with an opalescence so unearthly that the night was taut with expectancy.

In summer the darkness would have throbbed with the rasp of insects, but now all about him there was silence except for the dripping of the moonlit fog from the pines.

The mist enhanced the window lights of the Pengarth' house to festival brilliance. To John it seemed as if every room, corridor, and stairway must be crowded with swirling waltzers, each couple newly and hotly in love; but the silence persisted and the vision died and he knew that the impatience of the night was nothing more than the excitement in his own heart.

For a moment he stood on the front step beneath the canopy of oak branches that touched the house. Then Saul himself opened the door for him. John could see over Saul's shoulder to the parlour beyond the archway. Judith sat at her knitting by the elegant stove. His quick glance noted that for

an instant she was motionless, as if listening to the men at the door—waiting for a sound or a voice above the hum of the flame. John entered the front hall and remained there with his back to the parlour, quietly returning Saul's greeting.

"I'm on my way to town meeting," John said. "I thought if we walked over together we could talk a little business on the way."

"What I want to talk about will take longer than a few minutes. Come over again tomorrow night."

"All right, but aren't you going to the meeting anyhow?"

"Wasn't figuring to," Saul said. "You won't need my vote to get elected."

John glanced at him curiously. Saul had never missed a town meeting before.

"I'd better get under way then," John said. He was suddenly unsure of Saul's mood, and although he had an instinctive sense that the less he said at the moment, the better, he added, "I swear, Saul, I don't know why Zebulon Reade and those others picked on me."

Saul put his hand on his friend's arm and smiled bleakly. "That's clear enough. They think you're the best man. Sure you won't come in and sit down for a minute and warm up?"

Without turning, John was still aware of Judith in the room behind him, not glancing at him, her hands still knitting, her mind motionless and waiting. Yet the choice, he reminded himself, was always his.

"No," he said abruptly in reply to Saul's invitation. "I'd better get along."

He strode out of the house as if he had just passed a test of his strength. When he neared the Town Hall, he fell in with groups of men; but though he walked among them, he remained alone to prolong the taste of his victory over himself.

The men in the township who were not whalemén lived a life that followed the seasonal flow of harvests in the fields and in the sea. Fish-farmers, they called themselves.

In late February they took up their nets and went down to the inland creeks, which were churned to silver by the herring in spawn. By the end of March the herring were gone and it was time to turn to the fields. The winds grew warm in April, and the men finished their planting to rush their dories into the ocean surf at Squibnocket, where the cod had begun to swarm. The fish were dried in the sun on the bald brown rocks of Noman's, salted, and sold at New Bedford.

May, sweet and green, became June. The cod moved away to bluer waters, and back in the fields the June hay was coming due. By the first heat of summer, the stock and fields were needing daily care, but every day, too, the men walked over the hills to the shore because lobsters were beginning to appear in the traps. From July to blue September the buying schooners lay at anchor in the sheltered water of Vineyard Sound, buying the daily catch for Boston and New York. When the summer went, the lobsters went too.

The field crops were hurried in even before the air took on the northern bite of autumn, because the cod were swarming back from the deep ocean gorges and the dories were once again pushed out into the surf. Then the cod disappeared and finally the round of harvests was over. Boats and nets were taken up for indoor mending; and just before the frost, the last of the peat had to be dug, dried, and stored for the hot, pungent fires of winter.

There were other ways to fish, and some men leased sites from the town where they set up permanent fish traps which they tended daily all the year round. For miles along Vineyard Sound the lines of black net poles stood in single-file parades from the beach out into the water. The traps were considered

by these men to be as much their private property as their fields, and they left the hand-lining and lobstering for their less providential neighbours.

Whether they tended their own traps or followed the shore with the seasons, the men who filled the small Town Hall were used to helping each other; but they also had a very clear sense of what was properly their own and what was their neighbour's. Tonight they wanted to settle just such a question, and they were angry.

When John entered the hall, there were forty men present, standing about in small groups. The meeting had not yet begun, and the air in the room was tight with feeling. From the small dais at the front of the room Zebulon Reade, the moderator, motioned to John.

"I was delaying the meeting for you, John; we'll begin in a few minutes. They're still electioneering. Looks like the last thing either side wants is somebody who's neutral."

A bearded man nearby—Mead Elliot—with whom John had once shared a school bench, was speaking in a deliberately raised voice that was not softened by any such memory.

"Every name on the election list but one makes sense to me. Right now, fishing—trap fishing—is the big money crop of the island; and all of us here are going to be asked to vote tonight on whether or not to change a way this island has followed for a long, long time. With due respect and proper deference to Captain Gosnold, who most likely knows more about whaling than most others either on or off the island, I'd sure like to know what the Sam Hill he knows about locating or tending a fish trap!"

A second man in the same group continued the pretence that John was not in the room.

"Guess I'd agree with some things you said, Mead, but I sure disagree with everything else. The way this town has been

granting fishing rights just don't appear fair to me. Never did. There's no reason why one man should be able to put out a trap in a good place and keep it ten or fifteen years while his next-door neighbour gets tied to a poor location. A trap lease should be granted for no more than a few years at a time. When a man goes for whales, he goes where the whales are, and devil take the hindmost. That's all right on the ocean, because nobody owns the ocean. But trap-fishing sites belong to the town, and since every man here pays taxes to the town, every man ought to get his chance, turn and turn about, at the good sites. What I'd like to know is, does Captain Gosnold understand *that* difference between whaling and fishing?"

For John to be challenged this way was an affront to fifteen years of unquestioned command. He had long ago established his authority at sea, usually with his presence, and when necessary with his fists. Now he had the good sense to catch his impulsive anger.

He stepped down from the dais and walked directly over to them. Whatever his feelings had been before, he knew that he was now determined on his own election.

"Why not ask *me* the questions, Mead?" he said affably.

"I guess we more or less have," said Mead Elliot. "Even though Sam here and I are bound to vote different ways."

"When I was asked to serve—if elected—as selectman, nobody once asked me what I knew about whaling," John said. "Nobody asked me what I knew about the rights or wrongs of trap-fishing leases. Seems to me I wasn't being asked to settle those questions one way or another. Now, I was master of whaling vessels for many years because I was able to carry out the owners' orders. Those orders were: catch whales. So I caught whales the best I knew how. I never lost a whale once I got an iron into him, and no man ever jumped

a ship of mine once he signed his articles. The Board of Selectmen, as I see it, would be getting their orders from the men here tonight at this town meeting. Divide up fishing rights or catch whales—it makes no difference to me as long as it's an order. But mark this—once I *do* get the orders, I carry them out as I see fit. I trust my own judgment, and the owners trusted me. That's all I've got to say."

"That makes a lot of sense," said Elliot dryly. "A whaling master is sure used to carrying out owners' orders. Whether this town tonight decides to cut its throat by changing things every which way around, we still want to have a man who'll carry out what we here decide. So since I'm now willing to have a whaleman for selectman, I'm going to vote for Saul Pengarth. He's been home long enough to know what's going on."

John smiled at the slight.

"A vote for Saul is a good vote," he said, and walked away.

Saul would know in the morning what had been said, and there would be other votes for him. If Saul lost, he would deeply resent being passed over; and his bitterness would be directed not against the town, but against John, who had defeated him. John had no illusions about Saul. Ever since he had left the Pengarths', a part of his mind had noted that Saul had not said: "You're the best man." Instead Saul had said: "*They* think you're the best man." In Saul's heart, John knew, Saul did not agree. Yet John still wanted to win.

Reade rose and pounded his table with the town's gavel, and the men quickly seated themselves, filling every bench. There was a waiting silence as the minutes of the previous meeting were read, as the town treasurer detailed his dollars and pennies, as the town animal drover reported the number of stray sheep returned to the proper owners, as the fence viewer droned through his settlement of the dispute over the

fence maintenance between Hariph Grace and Timothy Parker.

Reade then read the full warrant. The first item was the election of a new Board of Selectmen, and he read off the list of candidates. There was no discussion. Slips of paper were handed out for the men to make their marks. Reade squatted down at the edge of the dais with the ballot box between his knees—a plain wooden box with a cover that snapped open and shut. The town clerk called out the names of voters, who lined up in single file. As each name was checked off, the voter slipped his ballot into the box, and the lid snapped shut until the next man moved into place. Except for the murmur from the clerk and the sound of the snapping lid, there was silence in the hall. Tellers were appointed, and John was one of the three elected. He received thirty-five votes. Saul, with only four votes, was badly defeated.

The main business of the evening, a hot brief argument, was as quickly settled because the men who held the town's best leases were outnumbered. The new selectmen were directed to elect a chairman among themselves and to find a way to divide up the town waters to be fished on three-year licences. They were to make their recommendations known to a special town meeting to be held within thirty days, and on that motion the meeting was adjourned.

The small groups of men who had stood around before the meeting now reassembled to discuss what had happened. Zebulon Reade, re-elected as moderator, came down the hall to John and shook his hand.

"Well, you won," he said. "I told you so."

"I'm just sorry about Saul's name being brought into it. He's not going to like it," John said. "He's not going to like it at all."

But he knew that the regret in his voice was really guilt; and

the guilt was not over a victory in a town election—it was a guilt for a hurt far closer to the heart of Saul's deepest pride.

2

The next night he kept his promise to Saul, even though he now expected trouble. When he walked over to the Pengarth house, the front door was unlocked. He found Judith in her accustomed seat, and Saul was not in the room at the moment. John looked down at her with hard directness, challenging her to make him feel her attraction. Her hands were busy, as if there had not been a moment's pause in their activity since the previous night.

"Good evening, Judith," he said.

She looked up, directly meeting his gaze with her liquid dark eyes as cool as if she had never gasped with love in his ear, had never thrust herself against him to writhe more deeply about his rigid possession of her. There seemed to be not even a shred of memory behind her tranquillity.

"Isn't Deborah with you?" she asked.

"No," he said, not moving his eyes from hers. "I came aboard only on business."

He remained standing, and Judith said nothing. She sat half turned away from him, and only a certain fixed impassivity indicated her own strain. He clasped his hands and walked across to a window; but he knew that he was hiding only from himself, because the feeling for her was still in him—as strong as ever—and he was in despair.

"Did you get enough berries yesterday?" he asked.

She nodded toward a Chinese vase holding berry stems.

"More than enough," she replied.

He waited, listening for Saul's footsteps. There was only silence.

"I wanted to come down into the hollow where you were," he admitted.

"Thank God you didn't," she said. "I was praying you wouldn't." The quiet bitterness of her voice was all the more marked because she still hadn't turned to look at him. "What are you to me? You're Saul's friend, and barely that!"

"I'm nothing to you," he said swiftly. "But just the same my heart stopped when I saw you, every nerve in my body was screaming for me to go down and touch you. Just to touch you! That's how I felt, and how you did too, because we feel the same things!"

Colour flooded her face, as if his hands had thrust past her half-hearted defence to where her body hungered most to be loved; but she had no time to retort. Saul was already entering the parlour, carrying a stack of ledgers. He arranged them with meticulous care on the top of a red-lacquer table.

"I heard you come aboard," he said briskly. "I've got all the papers shaken down, so pull a chair along of the table and I'll tell you how I think we stand. They bought our middle parcel, but our abutting land still retains a right of way for us smack across what they bought. Now if they want the right of way——"

"Ease off," John said, slowly collecting himself. Judith was knitting again. "Before we get on to that, I want to talk a bit about last night's meeting."

"What's there to talk about?" Saul said. "You got elected and then got made chairman of the board. Congratulations. Now, let's get back to talking about money——"

John shook his head. "Not yet, Saul, not yet. Town's given me a job to do, and I need help. The new board met this afternoon and decided to appoint a special committee to work

along with us on this business of the fishing rights. Since you were named same as I last night for selectman, I thought the two of us working together ought to be able to satisfy everybody."

Saul smiled a little. "You want me to work *under* you?"

"Not *under*. *With*. And it's not *for* me. It's for the town."

Saul shook his head. "Not the town either. Only four men voted for me. Nine times again that number voted against me. No, I thank you, John. When the town really wants 'me, they'll come direct. Besides, I don't hold with the way the town voted. Far's I can see, a man who's smart enough to get to Town Hall early enough to ask for the best lease deserves it. We always whaled it that way. They ought to fish it that way too. However, it's no concern of mine the way our down-island land is. Now, as I was saying, these fellows don't know that they don't own the right of way, and they've already begun to put up and sell summer cottages where they've got no title to. We've got them crotched, John. We ought to be able to get them for two-three thousand dollars."

"I don't know," John said. "They only paid five thousand for the whole two hundred acres."

• "Why, John, those fellows are going to make fortunes from the summer people. Asking three thousand dollars is pretty near giving them charity."

John smiled.

"Can't say that I see those Edgartown men taking off their hats to us for our charity. They're whalermen, too; they trade just as sharp as we do."

"Oh, they'll fight," Saul answered calmly. "If they do we'll shoot up our price. Listen, John, what are men like us supposed to do to keep our money busy? Time was when we could buy a share of a voyage, but there's no whaling. The New Bedford Mills? We're both in them as much as a man can be.

once breaking the flow of references to leases and opinions.

John wanted to glance at Judith, but he didn't dare: he was too aware of her. The deluge of words poured over him harmlessly, and behind his mask of attention he saw only a darkened room in which a man and a woman were clasped in wordless embrace, blind and insensate to the worlds of guilt and shame into which their furious act was plunging them. He closed his eyes, but the actors, now, suffused with the redness of his own blood, played their fascination against his inner lids. He turned away to the stove window, but the lovers were there, too, blue and sinuous in the flame. He examined his palms, but again it was as if he were holding a diaphanous picture book in which a transparent woman and a transparent man stood transfixed for the few pulse beats of ultimate fusion.

Wherever he looked he was the spying intruder on his own privacy, and so he was forced to bear the burden of two secrets: the lovers' guilt, and the deeper, more unutterable secret of their innocence. Within the embrace there was no sense of wrongdoing, but only a happiness so great that words like *right* and *wrong* were meaningless.

The successive visions buffeted him like a torrentuous sea. Deliberately he reached out his attention, struggled to catch a word, then a thought, and finally he dragged himself aboard Saul's solid talk of the business at hand. He sat astride the conversation for a few minutes, but the waves of the vision threatened to drag him back, and he cried out for help.

"Saul," he said in a voice that sounded tired but perfectly controlled, "heave to and start over again, man. I haven't put a thought to this in I don't know how many years."

Saul glanced at him over the papers.

"What didn't you understand?"

"I don't know. I guess I wasn't listening, that's all."

"No, I guess you weren't," Saul said slowly as he lowered his eyes. "Judith, will you leave us, please?"

She rose at once and went from the room. Both men waited until her footfalls passed up the stairs and then sounded over their heads.

"All right," Saul said. "Do you want to say it or must I?"

"Say what?"

"You and I know each other too well and for too long to be playing games, John. I know what's been on your mind all night, and I know what you were seeing when you tried to look as if you were listening to me. Who do you think you're fooling?"

John stared straight into his friend's eyes.

"All this time I've been trying to hide it from myself," Saul went on. "But tonight you heard me say something I'd rather die than have anyone know." He rose suddenly, and his body was rigid with agony. "God, God, how we trap ourselves!" he burst out. "Here we are, grown men with everything we set out to get, and it turns out to be nothing that we want!"

John was as moved by the vehemence as he was by his own relief.

"You're right, Saul," he said sadly. "Whatever became of that boy on St. Helena?"

"What boy?"

"You mentioned him yourself only a little bit back. You had a son; what became of him?"

"I don't know," Saul said slowly. "Many's the time I wanted to sit down and write a letter. But I don't know what happened to the woman, or what she calls herself after all these years. I'd look like a fine fool, wouldn't I?"

"What do you care? He's your son, isn't he?"

"And bring him here? To live with me? In a house with a

stepmother his own age? He'd just laugh at me, eat me out of everything, and damned if I'd say that I blamed him. Maybe if I had done it a few years ago when he was still young enough so that I could train him my way . . ."

"A few years?"

Saul looked at him as if he were stupid. "How long ago do you think I was told that she'd never bear a child of mine?"

"Doctors aren't always right."

"I'm not talking about doctors. I'm talking about what *she* said herself. What do you think I was talking about tonight? There are women who can't stand men. In the old days they would have been nuns. Today we don't have nuns on this island; and instead of putting women like that away by themselves to be holy and gentle together, we marry them off to healthy men. She can't abide men. Not just *me*. If I thought it was just me, I'd—I'd kill her. It's *any* man. I know it's not her fault, but it doesn't help me. Sometimes I hate her, only because I still care so much! One day I'll lose my head and force the one thing that will make her look at me as if I had slobbered her. Take those papers home with you," he said brusquely. "There's no need for me to tell you anything that you can read by yourself. When you're ready, sign where you're supposed to. Or don't sign. You're right. Nothing makes much difference, and there's nothing you can count on. Even the big oak outside turns out to be rotten at the core. I built this house to be by the tree, and now one of these days I'll have to cut the damn tree down. Or else let it go by the board itself. Won't last through the winter. Nothing's like it looks on the surface, and certainly not me. I guess you knew that I'd take the election full on the beam, and you were only trying to get me righted again with this talk of a trap-fishing committee. Well, I'm just not the kind of man who can

accept that kind of favour. I wish I were, and I also wish you had known that I couldn't accept it."

"It was no favour, Saul; I really want you."

Saul shook his head slowly and smiled. "No," he said. "No more than I'd want to share with you. We're not sharers, John. We're masters."

When John walked home, the cloud of fog had fallen into frost. High clouds were moving fast, but there was little wind on his cheek. By dawn, he knew, the gale in the sky would come pouring down along the moors.

3

In the morning John was awakened by the pound of surf along South Beach—a sustained roar that was the boom and collision of boulders rolled back and forth in the scethe of the wash. John slid from sleep to half-sleep with a deep sense of terror. He should have been on deck hours ago. The ship was being blown on to a weather shore, and at any moment there would come the massive lurch and grind that would feel as if his own backbone were breaking. . . .

He opened his eyes and was made dizzy by the lack of motion—then the dizziness became glad relief that the murderous sea was behind him. Only now could he admit to himself how much of his life had been spent fighting terror, thrusting it out of his own sight, so that he could work coolly and with calculation to bring his ships alive through the danger.

He closed his eyes again, and the pleasure of safe survival slowly deepened to contentment, for it seemed to him that he had spent the entire previous evening with Judith. But as he grasped at the memory, he awoke still more and the pleasure

turned darker in the way a falling gauze scarf changes hue and shape.

He had hardly spoken to Judith, he recalled, yet that brief moment had been enough to warm him. Then the figure of Saul leaped into his memory, making him catch his breath as if in fear; and in flight, John came fully awake.

He sat up in the bed. It was scarcely light out, but he saw that the whole day would be one long grey dawn that would merge into dusk and then return to darkness like a sea hulk that rises, turns, and then sinks from view without ever breaking the surface of endless water.

The half-waking thoughts of Judith were gone and would never come again, because Judith had been made subtly different by Saul's words last night. She was less; magic had fled from her.

At breakfast Deborah asked how the business had gone.

"Fair," said John. "Only fair. It will take a long time."

"You sound as if you don't much care."

"It's not to my taste," he said slowly. "Saul and I sold something in good faith. Now Saul discovers that we didn't turn over everything. We weren't holding out. We just didn't know we had it. My way of doing would be to turn over to them what was left out by accident. Saul wants to sell it to them for almost as much as they paid in the first place. It's sharp Yankee practice. But I guess they'd do the same to us if they were in our shoes. If we did any different, they'd think us fools."

"You don't have to tag along with Saul."

"No, I don't," he agreed. "But it's either Saul changes his mind to suit me or I change my mind to suit him. I just don't care as much as he does, that's all."

"Saul doesn't care either," she said. "Not about the land or the money. He's only whipping the world."

John glanced at her quickly. Whenever he wasn't with Deborah he forgot that her shrewd common sense was one of the things he had always admired in her.

"Why should Saul want to whip the world?"

"He doesn't like it, that's why."

"It's been pretty good to him, seems to me."

"In all the years you've known Saul, you mean to tell me he never once let on to you what it is he wants?"

"You mean sons?"

"That's only part of it," she said. "The least part. He *thinks* he wants sons."

"He's as good a judge as any of what he wants. What are you getting at? Is it Judith?"

"What do you know about him and Judith?"

"What's there to know?"

"My, you're cautious!" She laughed. "What did he tell you about that?"

"Never said a word." He looked directly at her. "She ever say anything to you?"

"People don't talk about things like that."

"I know *I* don't," he remarked, and when she flushed painfully, he despised himself for the hurt he had given her.

"Well, what is it that Saul wants?"

"I don't know," she said tartly, and rose to pour his coffee.

"I don't understand him, or——"

"Or me?"

"Or you—sometimes," she said, accepting his challenge. "Here you are with everything we once planned to have, and you're not a satisfied man!"

"Maybe I'm no longer the same man who made those plans."

"If you're not, I'd sure like to know who you are, then."

He shook his head. "When people get to talking, Deborah,

foolish things get said. I've got Saul's papers to get back to him. That's what should be on my mind."

"I'm going to Annie Pease's this afternoon. Judith will be there. I could save you time and a trip if I got the papers to her to take home."

He started to nod, when a sudden premonition told him that Judith at that moment was all alone. It was as clear as if he were looking into the windows of the house.

He raised the coffee cup to his lips, and the door opened to the grey morning. Billy Bascom stood there, ready to be invited in.

When the two men had finished their breakfast ritual and the Indian was ready for the morning tour, John told him to go ahead by himself.

"I've got to go over to Pengarth's," he said. He saw Deborah look at him curiously; he added, "The sooner Saul gets to work, the sooner the business will be finished. Might as well be now."

4

The day outside was bitter, and he walked across the moors bent against the wind, but no cold penetrated to the happiness that was suddenly in his heart. When he pounded on the knocker of the square house, he had to wait some time. Above his head the old oak twisted and writhed, and its branches clawed blindly at the house. Judith flung open the door, and they faced each other for a moment. Then he was blasted bodily into the house on a gust of air that sent the carpets billowing and made the pictures rattle against the wall. He had to help her close out the gale.

"Where's Saul?"

"He's not here."

He watched her with fascination, for he could almost have said the words along with her. He seemed to have known it all along with the same obdurate conviction with which he would awaken in his cabin bunk knowing that this would be the day for a ninety-barrel bull sperm—a sureness so powerful that he could only nod in agreement when a few hours later a voice from the masthead cried, "Blows!"

He made himself sound casual. "Where did Saul go?"

"Down at the bight with the others to make the boats fast."

"We *are* alone then?"

"What difference does it make?" she demanded.

"All I want is to *talk* to you," he said gently. "Not hiding, not whispering, not looking over our shoulders to see who might be watching. Even if it's only to say good-bye or that it can't ever happen again. My God, all I want is just to say out loud what I'm feeling."

She put her fingers to her forehead and whispered:

"We shouldn't be feeling anything."

"But we do. A hundred different ways all at once. Up until yesterday, whenever I tried to work all I could see was your face. Wherever I was, I was with you again up in that room. This morning I was sure I didn't care whether or not I ever saw you again. Now that's all gone. All I know is that I'm happy when I'm with you!"

"What did Saul tell you last night?" she asked. "About me."

"Nothing about you. Only about himself."

"What did he say?"

He looked at her sharply. "What's between you two?"

"Nothing," she said, as if she were suddenly empty, as if her very being had gone limp. "Nothing. We know each other's names, what our voices sound like, how our eyes stare at each

other's, and I—I can't abide him," she said with sudden loathing. "Everything he does: the way he puts his hand to his chin when he's thinking, the way he sucks his lip, the very way he moves those hairy hands, even the sound he makes when he breathes. I always wanted to love him; I think I still want to, but I can't. God help me, I can't! He's not a bad man. He's as good as you are. Better in many ways. And yet——"

"Good man, bad man, what does all that mean?" John said. "Who is good enough to be worth loving? Loving has nothing to do with the person who's loved—only with whoever feels it. There's no right and there's no wrong. It just is or it isn't. That's why you and I are *not* evil, Judah. What we did was right!"

"It wasn't," she insisted in pain. "Nor should we pretend that it was. Deborah is my only friend, and Saul is yours——"

"Look!" he said softly. "My hand is on your arm. You'll remember that touch for days and so will I—and we'll both be happier for it. How can that be evil?"

She shook her head, but his grasp grew firmer and she was unable to draw away. At the very first sign that she could not resist him, his hand gently but surely drew her closer with a demand over which he had no control. He was once again plunged beyond himself, and he drew her along with him just as in the attic room; and as before, even though they were totally absorbed in each other and themselves, their ears were alert above their own panting and the dry lashing of the house by the oak branches for the footstep that might not come for hours or might even at this moment be about to sound on the granite slab of a step.

Presently they sat in silence side by side on the black horseshair sofa, dropped breathlessly from the insidious grip of magic. Here, at least, they could move more quickly into the

attitudes of innocence, but still they listened for the footstep above the wind and the roaring oak. With great tenderness he put his hand on her slender shoulders, still warm with the swift exertion. She leaned against him but covered her face with her hands and shook her head.

"I c^ou^{ld} n^{ot} even cry," she said hopelessly.

"Why cry?" he said with gentleness. "It's d^{one} and we did it."

"Yes!" she said with passionate vehemence. "I should hate everything I felt. I used to be able to make myself bear Saul; now I grow sick if I even think he's about to brush by me. I never knew it could be this way for me. I thought pleasure in life was only for men. Oh, my God!" She shuddered. "Oh, God. Go away."

"It would look queer. I brought papers for Saul."

"Then leave them with me and go away. We've done enough for Saul this morning!" She rose suddenly, and there was such bitterness in her dry eyes that he felt she hated him. She actually pushed him, crying, "Now go!"

He left. Nothing at all had been gained from the tormenting weeks of denial.



For days the wind held, so that it was useless to leave the house except for short trips to the barn. Forced to stay at home, John prowled the ice-cold rooms, keeping out of Deborah's way, only to fall into the other trap of remaining imprisoned within himself. At last he drove himself from the house into the weather and made the rounds of the other selectmen to rout them out for a meeting.

"Why crack on all that sail?" he was asked. "Folks don't

expect us to claw our way down here to talk trap lines. The fishermen themselves won't stir beyond their front doors in the weather."

But even if others could remain comfortably at home, John knew he dare not even try.

"The town gave us our orders," he said stubbornly. "And we're supposed to follow them out whether or not the wind comes on to blow a gale. Now, all of us are here, and I call this meeting to order!"

He rode his board so hard that they worked out a plan in far less time than anyone could have expected. By the third day there was once again nothing to do but remain at home. A fine sand of snow came on the wind and stung the outer walls, penetrating the tiniest crevices, so that miniature snowdrifts had to be swept from the floors within the house. Late on the seventh day the wind died and the stillness was deafening.

That evening Saul appeared after supper with a package of his papers.

"Too bad Judith didn't come along with you," Deborah said. "After being housebound for so long, we two could have had a nice visit while you men talked."

"You're right," Saul replied. "Never thought to ask her, though. With this kind of winter making up, it won't be too long before there won't be any visiting at all."

The men worked on the dining-room table, and Deborah withdrew to the kitchen. The door between the two rooms was left open for the heat from the range, and so Deborah was aware that the evening's work was ending much sooner than expected. She drew her shawl about her and came back to the table to find Saul writing out a fair copy in his precise hand while John sat beside him.

"Seems pretty early to be going home," she remarked. "I've

got coffee and some nice pie. John, go fetch Judith while Saul finishes. Then we can all spend a little time together."

"Good idea," said Saul, without looking up from his work. "If you don't mind, John."

"It's well after nine," John said slowly. "Judith might not want to come."

"Tell her I want her to," Saul replied.

"She'll have to walk," John said.

"And when didn't Judith walk? I declare, John, I don't know what's got into you," Deborah said. "You were always anxious for company. Now, get along with you."

Saul raised his head slowly with a stiff, unsmiling expression. "Unless you're too tired to entertain us, John."

"Don't be a damn fool, Saul," John answered. "It just takes me a while to get to my feet."

Judith's eyes went wide when she saw who was at her door with a lantern, but before she could say anything he had walked past her into the house.

"You're to come back home with me," he said abruptly. "Saul and I are finished with our work."

"Tell him I've gone to bed."

"Saul knows you haven't turned in."

She turned with anger. "You arranged it," she said.

"I arranged nothing. Was it *my* idea to be snowbound at the wedding? Saul reopened this land business. Tonight's idea was Deborah's, not mine. There's something outside ourselves that's pushing us together. No matter what we do, there it is."

She looked up at him for a moment with wide terrified eyes, as if he had just said something that she herself had dreaded to put into words.

"Things don't happen that way."

"But they are happening," he insisted. "I can swear they are!"

Then she controlled herself. "I'll get my things and we'll go," she said.

She left the parlour. They were alone again in the house, and he could think of nothing else. When she returned, she was carrying her bonnet, shawl, and cloak over her arm.

"We have a few minutes," he said.

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can," she said, standing before a mirror. Then after a silence she spoke accusingly to his reflected image. "That was not what you meant, was it?"

Their eyes met. Her hands fell slowly to her sides and she turned from the man in the glass to the man who stood immediately behind her. Then swiftly her hands rose again and reached out.

But afterward neither could meet the other's eye. They walked all the way to John's in separate silences that had shut out all intimacy; and for the rest of the evening they were coldly hostile to each other, as if they were bitter antagonists in a secret war.

Chapter Five

1

BY morning the wind had risen again. Snow was a threat behind the chill in the air. Far above the swirling murk of clouds an invisible full moon pulled tides higher and higher against the cliffs, so that the incessant pounding of surf drummed through the earth as well as through the air. A gale was on the way.

About an hour after the bleak dawn there was a heavy beat on the front door. Israel Norton stood on the step, leaning his head into the grey wind. He had chin whiskers, a clean-shaven lip, and he wore his old sea coat and cap beneath sou'wester oilskins. Behind him on the dust-lashed road was his supply wagon with its hooped canvas top. Across the wind-rippled canvas in big black letters was the legend, "Israel Norton's Store." He had never bothered to paint out the original insignia beneath, still legible after all these years: *Quartermaster Corps, Fifth Mass Cav Div USA*. The old horse in the shafts looked miserable in the weather. Pebbles rattled and danced past its hoofs, and the wind bored lines across its shaggy winter coat. Across the hills the limbs of Pen'garth's oak streamed like ribbons.

"Morning, John. Deborah ready?" Israel's normal voice was so hoarse that strangers thought he was whispering.

"Ready for what? Come aboard and get out of that weather."

"Got no time to come in," Israel retorted impatiently. "Deborah told me she wanted to ride with me next time I go

to Edgartown. Well, time's come, and here I am—going."

"Oh dear!" said Deborah when John came into the kitchen and told her. "I asked him so long ago that I clean forgot. I thought it would be nice if I was able to see Esther and the children for a few hours and be back in time for supper. Since you won't be working outside, maybe you'd like to go."

"No, Deborah," he said slowly. "I don't feel at home at Esther's the way you do."

"That's downright foolish."

"Maybe it is, but that's the way I feel."

"Now, John, Esther loves you and you know it."

"I know it," he said gently. "Sure."

"You have this funny notion that everything's changed

He shook his head. "We can talk about that some other time. Israel's waiting, and he's not getting happier."

"Then I'd better go," she said regretfully. "Otherwise he'll never stop for me again. Tell him I'll be ready in a few minutes. You don't mind me going, do you, John?"

"No."

"You sure?" she insisted anxiously.

"I'm sure," he replied, and that was the truth, because it would be a relief to have her gone for a while. When she was in the next room, he was always aware of her as a sort of burden, as if any moment he might be called upon to say or do something he didn't feel.

"All right, I'll wait," Israel grumbled in his painful rasp. He had already climbed into the shelter of his wagon. "But she's had three weeks to get ready since she told me she wanted to go. What's she going to do in these few minutes she couldn't do in three weeks? That's something I'd like to understand about women!"

Presently Deborah hurried to the door, properly dressed for a visit to town beneath her thick cloak of island weave. She faced a trip of ten miles each way along a gale-swept country road in an over-age sutler's cart, but in Edgartown she would be eating from Sèvres china beneath a Waterford chandelier. Esther's husband had never had his standards of space or comfort cramped by years at sea, and he preferred to live like a Nantucket shipowner.

"And, John," Deborah said, pausing in her rush, "I told Judith to come over this morning with her dress patterns and sew with me. Israel's so beside himself I daren't ask him to put back so I can tell her not to come. Just put the red cloth in the north kitchen window."

"What red cloth?"

"Sometimes I don't think you ever listen to a word I say. That red cloth is a signal we worked out a long time ago. I remember writing to you about it. If one of us was expecting the other and had to go out, we always put a red cloth in the window. She'll see it from her house and be saved the trip."

She told him where the cloth could be found and then stepped out into the wind, but once again remembered something undone. She came back, kissed John's check, and looked up at him questioningly when he impulsively returned the kiss with a rough warmth. But Deborah's question was too deep and poignant to be put into words. She sighed and hurried away. Israel's hand reached out for her and pulled her up. Then they were both hidden by the tripping canvas.

John went into the kitchen and found Billy Bascom waiting there. John motioned to him to help himself to a cup of coffee and to sit down. The red cloth was exactly where Deborah had said, and John examined it thoughtfully for a moment. Then when he noticed the Indian was watching him, he

brought it to the table, feeling obscurely guilty, as if the old man had heard Deborah's instructions.

But when breakfast was finished, John was reluctant to rise. He remained seated and looked down at his clasped hands.

"I'm working on my figures," John said. "I'll find you later in the barn. You have plenty to do, don't you?"

"First off, I'm going to get your sleigh ready," said the Indian. "And the big sledge wants the runners trued. Going to have snow, all right."

John sat a while after he was alone. An odd lethargy seemed to have removed his body from the control of his mind. He could not make himself move, but he could examine what he was planning as if he were watching an accomplice. No one would be surprised if he were to forget to do what Deborah asked, and there were any number of reasons why he should remain at home that morning. He had been thrust by pure chance into Judith's company so many times that this would appear to be only one more. He wanted desperately to have her come again. They would have whole hours together without fear.

He stared at the clasped hands which refused to thrust him away from the table. The silent minutes slipped away. Deborah must be a good mile away, with no chance of returning, and Saul himself had heard her ask Judith to come over.

Suddenly he was striding into the kitchen, where in one continuous motion he seized the red cloth and hooked it over the windowpane. He no more knew where he had found the strength of purpose than he had understood the immobility of a few minutes before. His hand reached out to snatch away the cloth, but he drew back from temptation. He ached with self-denial. What he was doing, he had done only for Deborah;

yet he was giving up something she would never miss, and he punished her with smothered resentment.

He went at once to the little office where he kept the daybooks. His attention, though, was only sporadic. Every few minutes his hand would drop the quill pen and his eyes wander from the ruled column. He was a fool to have put up the signal, he thought. What difference would it have made if she came? The iron answer was always the same: Sooner or later you must stop. But, he asked himself again, what is the use of stopping if it will leave me with only a hatred for Deborah? Yet the inflexible self replied at once: If you wait until later, then you will only hate Deborah that much more.

Angrily he looked down at his hand. Caught by the taskmaster, his hand closed about the pen. The writing was resumed and figure after figure appeared on the page while the blue smoke of his cigar floated in tendrils through the air. Behind his placid, thoughtful face the argument never ceased raging.

Judith was in the quiet house before he heard the door close behind her.

"Deborah?" she was calling. "Deborah?"

He rose, shocked, and he stood in the doorway with his hands against the frame.

"Why did you come?" he demanded harshly.

2

Judith looked up at him, blank with astonishment. She was still numb and breathless from the buffeting of the wind. The shock of his attack kept her staring at him while her heart pounded with the knowledge that there was no one else in the

house. She was excited and at the same time she was in despair.

"But where's Deborah?" was all she could say.

"On her way to Edgartown with Israel Norton. What's the difference where she is? You knew she wasn't here!"

She could still only wonder why he was so angry. She didn't want to be there with him any more than he seemed to want her.

"I didn't know she had gone. Why do you say I knew?"

"Because of that damned red rag I put in the kitchen window."

"Red rag?" she said slowly; then she closed her eyes in helplessness, not only at the immediate moment, but at the way her whole life was beginning to turn. "It's been years since Deborah and I used that signal. I walked along the road with my head down against the wind. Even if I had remembered what it was, I wouldn't have seen it."

His clenched white teeth were angry, and she suddenly knew how he had looked on a storm-threatened quarter-deck, shouting desperate orders to running men.

"And to think of the sweat I put myself through, forcing myself to rig it up so you wouldn't come!" He laughed. "It was a test I set for myself. A test of my good intentions, and by God, I passed it. So now I'm a master of good intentions, duly licensed for all oceans and tonnages! Judith, it doesn't make any difference what our intentions are."

"You really put it in the window, not Deborah?"

"Is it so hard to believe? Yes, I *was* able to do it."

"Does Sarah Ann Coffin know that Deborah went to Edgartown?" she asked slowly.

"Now how in the name of God could that make any difference?" he burst out in exasperation.

"Because she was on the road and saw me coming here."

He would never appreciate what a woman would feel under the circumstances; yet because he was now the man deepest in her life, she had to keep on talking, explaining: "If she was on her way to the store, she'll know that Israel stopped for Deborah, and then she'll know that I'm alone here with you."

"Well?"

"So that even if we were innocent——"

"And aren't we innocent?" he demanded. "I'm standing here, and you're over there. All we're doing is talking about where Deborah went. What's more innocent than that? I'll tell you what I think, Judith. You're not afraid of what people will see you doing. You're afraid they'll see into your secret thoughts!"

"John, I must go," she said faintly, turning to the door. He didn't know what she was talking about or what was important to her. "I really must."

"Go ahead," he said without moving. His voice was quiet. "But remember the next time you're blaming me, I was the one who put the signal in the window and you were the one who came anyhow."

"John, if you had the strength and decency to put up the cloth, why don't you have the strength to let me go in peace?"

"Because I don't want you to go any more than you want to go yourself."

"I must!"

"I'm not holding you. Look, here are my hands— open, empty. Go ahead. Go!" he shouted with the violence of his despair.

"John, be quiet," she said weakly, closing her eyes and leaning her head against the door. "No, it's all true. Wherever I go, whatever I do, I see you, I feel you, I hear you. Every night I go to bed praying that it will end, but even before I

finish the prayer I'm thinking of you again and the way we were. What frightens me most is that I feel no evil, no shame—only a kind of horror that there isn't any shame."

"Judith," he said, "I want you so! We could sit quietly and talk——"

"Talk!" she said with derision. "Only after it had happened again, and we'd sit in silence, hating each other——"

"Do you really hate me, Judith?"

"Do I hate you?" She looked up at him, at his dark strong face, at the hair she had only at moments permitted herself to caress, at the tall muscular body she had sensed but had never really known; and then she looked deep inside herself for the name of the fascination that could hold her in spite of all her tradition, her pride, and her prayers. Whatever it was, it was too powerful to be anything but evil. "You terrify me," she said, and then with the most terrible candour she knew, she added, "As if you were Satan himself!"

3

She swung the door behind her and then stepped out. He stood in the doorway while the gale roared through the house, slamming door after door upstairs as if madmen were playing a game of wild pursuit. He watched her go down the lonely road. Her cloak flapped and whirled so that she looked like a creature of the air, like the hilltop trees writhing against a grey sky that seemed to be continually disintegrating into black shreds of cloud. Wherever he looked, the implacable wind was blowing apart the entire world. She had come and gone, and the house would be colder and emptier than ever. And that was the last sight of her he had for almost three weeks.

For the wind that day was only a preparation. By the time Deborah arrived at seven o'clock that night, redfaced and gasping, the weather had reached a pitch of tormented frenzy such as he had rarely seen. /

"If the wind hadn't been behind us, we never would have made it," she said. "As it was, when he turned up the hill at the West Tisbury fork, we almost capsized."

"Why didn't you lay over at Esther's?" John asked. "That damned wagon and you and Israel could have been blown clear off the island."

"You know how stubborn Israel is. He just kept saying, 'Wind's only a lot of air moving in the same direction a little faster than usual, that's all.'"

The wind was a storm of sound—a turmoil of shrieks, shouts, and cries—the sustained bass sigh from the vortices in the lee of the boulders, the piercing whistle from the sere long grass that streamed flat along the ground, vibrating like thousands of yellow snake tongues. The bare tough trees were ganglia of sharp strings in a continuous tenor jangle—deep, doleful, and damned. The free air above any obstacle held the voices of a million women singing out in wild grief, each voice slightly different, one chiming in upon another, falling away and then returning, but the utter despair was always the same.

No thing ceased and nothing made sense, for the whole maniacal symphony was continually broken and shattered by the blast against the square-edged house—sometimes a shout and sometimes a clatter of hard drunken laughter that became a peounding on the wall as a loose shingle was gradually worked free and then ripped away.

When the bursts of snow came, the white flakes whirled with such chaos that sight blurred into dizziness, and he had to turn away from the window.

"What were you looking at?" Deborah asked.

He didn't move for a moment. Impulse made him want to say swiftly, "Deborah, I've got to tell you—I've been with Judith. Don't be hurt, please; you and I haven't loved each other for a long, long time."

And she would be silent for a terrible instant. Then very slowly she would reply, "What do you expect me to do?"

If she should ever ask him that, he knew he would burst out with the plea: "Make me love *you* the way I used to. Make everything the way we once were so sure it was always going to be. This is hell this way, Deborah, this is hell!"

Her real voice came to him, calm and slightly amused.

"I said, what were you looking at?"

He turned slowly, his dark face sober, gentle, and guilty for the terrible resentment that was like rust around his heart.

"Nothing," he said in a dead voice. "Just nothing at all."

Billy Bascom said he could remember only three such winters before. Bent over like a crab, the old man made his daily way about the farm. He even managed to get to the store and bring back part of the toll of misfortunes.

In Holmes Hole three schooners and a big lumber barquentine had dragged anchors and gone aground. Over to Lambert's Cove, Tait's barn had collapsed. Couldn't anyone count the trees that were down. Down to Cottage City one of the big white new hotels for off-island summer people had its whole front stove in from waves that came pounding over the bluff. Up Gay Head, during a snow squall, some folks had got a glimpse of a vessel with sails loose and sheets flying headed straight for the submerged rocks of Devil's Reef, but ten minutes later when the snow lightened for a moment there was nothing in sight but the empty heaving sea. No bodies washed up yet, but that didn't mean a thing.

No, Billy didn't think much of the chance of that briefly

glimpsed vessel sawing up and down the monstrous waves and headed straight for—well, excuse the language, Deborah.

"I know," said Deborah. She was pale and nervous from the continual siege of sound, cold, and tragedy. "Poor souls. Poor, poor souls!"

"Amen!" sighed Mr. Bascom. "Amen to that, God damn it!"

To John the confinement was almost beyond bearing. Whenever possible he found excuses to get out of doors, but no sooner was he outside where every effort and thought was spent on merely keeping one's feet than he realized that he was as much a prisoner in the gale as he was in the dark loneliness of his own home.

Except for references to things at hand, he had very little to say to Deborah, but she was in his mind as much as Judith was. He was continually tormented now by an almost irresistible urge to go to her and confess everything. And as many times as he imagined the confession, she responded with as many different questions.

"What do you want me to do, forgive you?" one Deborah would cry.

"To hell with forgiveness! That's not what I need."

"Then what do you want—permission? Do you dare to ask me for that?"

"What good is your permission? What I did, I did because I couldn't help myself. I didn't need your permission then, I didn't even have my own."

And the tormented woman would always come back to the same slow heartbroken question: "What do you want me to *do*?"

He too would always come back to the same last desperate plea: "Make us love each other the way we used to!"

And so while he seemed taciturn, his silence was only the

fragile shell covering an impassioned conversation with her that raged continually in his heart. Ahead of him, for the rest of his life, he could see nothing but this loneliness, this longing, this imprisoning suppressed rage.

4

Yet one morning he opened his eyes with a sudden lightness of spirit that was inexplicable until his senses told him that the storm was finally over. The sun was rising over the golden downs and the sky overhead was a clear, cloudless blue. It was only early December after all, and December on the Vineyard was still autumn with a soft midday warmth. He dressed quickly and was out of the house merely to feel the day.

Distantly the surf still boomed, but several days would have to pass before the sea wore out its frenzy and subsided. Even this early in the day the air had that unique balminess, as if it had been borne on a breeze that had once, perhaps a thousand miles away, possessed a tropical warmth. The tough vegetation of the downs and the sheep pastures was untouched by the steady gales, and the morning sunlight could still find the colours of autumn foliage.

He was amazed to find how completely he had forgotten the contagious gaiety of the island landscape when the sun shone—the serenity, the peace, the transparent softness of the blue air, and the glinting cobalt water that was streaked with swaths of brilliant green wherever the sandy bottom was free of undersea vegetation. The depression of the past three weeks was forgotten like a nightmare an hour after awakening. He was happy, impatient for work. There were a thousand things to do about the farm and a thousand things to do about the township. The selectmen ought to be holding a special

meeting to discuss repairs of washed-out roads. He ought to go over to the creek to see how his beached boat had fared. All at once there were so many claims on his attention and so much eagerness to do everything that he didn't know where to begin.

"Breakfast!" he shouted, re-entering the house. "Damn it, what about the captain's breakfast? Deborah! Oh——" He laughed as he saw her already in the kitchen, pleased with her for being there, pleased with himself for feeling this old warmth and companionship with her. He put his arm about her waist. "I'll tell you what I want to eat——" And he recited off a list of dishes: eggs, biscuits, chops, flapjacks, coffee, and a dozen other things, as if he hadn't eaten for all the bleak time of the gales.

"Well, Lazarus!" said Deborah, laughing. "You *have* come back from the dead! Next time we have weather like that I certainly will stay in Edgartown, for all the company you were! If you spoke more than five civil words all that time, I declare I didn't hear them. Maybe eating's what you needed all along."

To his intense satisfaction he finished everything he had asked for and was out of the house at work in the barn a good half hour before Billy Bascom even arrived. He was so drunk with pent-up energy that when he left the Indian's cottage later, at eleven o'clock, he decided to walk down to Norton's store for the news before going home to dinner. Perhaps there might even be time to put in at the creek. The day was like wine—almost spring as the hot sun shone down—and he could hear through the clear echoing air the distant ring of hammers where repairs were already under way.

The sun was hot enough to make him wipe his face, and he felt younger than he had in years, 'intoxicatingly young. He had no cares that amounted to anything. All he wanted was

to stride along the highway with a girl at his side—and he thought at once of Judith. Well, why not Judith? he asked. Just before the fork where the road met the Pengarths' lane he daydreamed of a delightful meeting with her, for she too at that moment would be headed for the store. In the daydream, they walked along together in the sunshine, half a mile each way, in full view of the world; and no one seeing them could possibly be the wiser.

He thought of the possibility with a smile on his face that became a startled burst of laughter when he actually saw her coming down the path. He touched the peak of his cap and waited for her. She was smiling questioningly at him.

"Why are you laughing?"

"You're going to the store!" he said. "Am I right?"

"Yes. It's high time I did. Are you going?"

"I am. Didn't you know?"

"Know?" She was puzzled. "How should I know?"

"You *knew*," he insisted half teasingly. "Why, you must have known. Let's walk together, Judith. It looks perfectly natural for us to meet this way and go on. There I was, walking along, hoping—thinking how it would be if you were to appear, and you did. Judith, it was like magic. That's why I couldn't help laughing. This *has* happened before with us."

"Has it?"

"You know it has. Over at the wedding I kept wishing I'd find you alone, and I did, even if I kept telling myself it was wrong. Do you remember that time I saw you picking berries? It happened only a moment after I had felt that if I didn't see you soon I'd go crazy. When I brought those papers over for Saul the day he was away, I had the queerest feeling that he would be away. And it must be more than just chance. There's been far too much of it for that."

She was silent, but they were walking in step, strolling like lovers.

"Judith," he said swiftly to her averted face, "there's something outside ourselves, a kind of white magic that's bent on making our courses cross. No matter what we do or try to do, we always end up together. At sea when a gale blows, there's only two things you can do. You can head into the wind under stays'ls and reefed spanker and hang on, fighting it out. But even though you think you're sailing forward, you're really falling back at a few knots. The other course, to turn and run before the blow—just run—and that's like soaring on a cloud; in either case you're far off your course by the time the gale is over. One way is pure fight every second, and the other is pure freedom. Ah, Judith, let's sail downwind! Aren't you tired of beating and falling back? Here we are, alone on the open road. We can't even touch hands, but this is the place to talk to me honestly."

"I am tired," she confessed. "As tired as you are."

"Then let's try being happy for a change. What have we been fighting all this time? A magic that wants us to be together. All it wants is for us to have the happiness of being in love. Everything we said to each other before was only one damned lie after another."

She looked at him questioningly.

"But it was," he insisted. "Wasn't it a lie to tell ourselves we were miserable when we weren't at all? Just to see you across a room made me happy. To shout at you, to fight with you made me happy. To walk with you like this makes me happy. Judith, Judith, tell me you feel the same thing."

"I do," she said with intense feeling. "I do. I do!"

"Then don't fight any more—don't hate me simply because I can't help doing what you, in your own heart, are crying for me to do."

She laughed softly. "Am I such a hypocrite?"

"I'll say nothing on that score. Just promise me."

"I promise. But, John, how do you think we can go on seeing each other without everyone knowing?"

"Ah, that's the point. We won't ever make any arrangements. No more than we have until now. If we were really meant to be together, then things will fall that way and protect us when we need it. We'll force nothing—just sail down-wind wherever that magic wind blows."

Judith laughed again—a lover's laugh of sadness.

"Why, by God, I'll prove it to you right now," he said. His eyes were gay because of an unassailable assurance of premonition. "See that lamb there staring at us over the stone fence? By the time I count three the magic will make it turn away, because the magic will protect us from being found out."

The shaggy head stared at them through stupid milky eyes and then slowly arched its neck about to graze backward toward the flock from which it had strayed.

"You see!" John said. He was like a boy, and she looked at him as if she too were ten years younger. "We own the world," he said to her. "And there we were, two fools, trying to turn our backs on it!"

"Oh, John!" she said, laughing; and for the first time there was pure tenderness between them.

They turned again happily down the road that was leading them to exactly the same destination as before, but now they both felt as if all the horizons in the world had interchanged simply because they had willed them to.

Chapter Six

1

ON a sunny windless afternoon they went hand in hand, the only two human figures moving along the miles of white beach. They walked close together, sometimes hidden in the shadow of the great boulders that lay strewn along the shore, and always dwarfed by the towering cliffs that rose sheer from the sand. They knew that anyone pausing for even a moment on the cliffs could recognize them from a mile away, but they were too happy, too reckless, too sure of their protecting magic to care for the risk.

The afternoon sun was still half a sky above the horizon, and the breakers curled listlessly in the winter sunshine—watery prisms that gleamed with gold and then smashed into white foam. The entire world seemed beautiful and blue again with the usual Vineyard winter—mild clear autumn drenched with balminess.

“I remember the first time I saw you,” she said softly. “You came to my father’s house when my sisters were teasing me.”

“I remember,” he said, smiling. “You were a funny child.”

“I thought you were an old man.”

“Why, I wasn’t thirty!”

She laughed. “I didn’t mean old and grey. You were very tall and handsome and you wore a moustache. But you *were* twice as old as I was. You had been all over the world, and I knew that you had——”

She stopped, and he didn’t prompt her. She had been about

to say, "And I knew that you had a wife and children at home," and such references were not to be made.

"At any rate, that's when you fell in love with me," he said lightly, helping her over the silence.

"That's *not* when I fell in love with you," she said, laughing, at the impertinence of his conceit. "Why? Was that when it began to happen for you?"

"I don't know when I fell in love with you, Judith. It wasn't until after I came back."

"When you came back, you frightened me."

He laughed. "I sure made a fine showing for you. First I seemed like an old man, and then I scared you. How did I frighten you?"

"You never joked or smiled the way you used to. You were so sad. I was afraid that at any moment you were going to explode with a fury twice as terrifying as any other man's. I didn't want to come to Debor—to the house. I thought you didn't like me."

"Judith, the only time I was happy was when you came to the house, and you knew it."

She was thoughtful for a moment before she spoke.

"I didn't want to know, but I knew. Yes, I knew all right. I had to keep coming even though I knew I shouldn't. That was what really frightened me. It wasn't you at all."

"If I looked angry or sad, it was only because there was nothing I could do about my feeling for you."

"Then it was wrong for me to have come."

"We weren't going to talk about right or wrong. This is the way things happened, and I wouldn't have them any different."

"You really are happy?"

"Happier than I ever dreamed I could be. Aren't you?"

"I am, God forgive me." She sighed. "It's all, all wrong, but I don't care!"

With the magic that continually threw them together went the gift of day after day of soft skies and such bright suns that midday was like early September. Each time they met they fell to talking as if they had parted only a moment before; and they were immersed in a long, tenderly intimate conversation in which they flooded each other with reminiscence that gave them the illusion of creating a life together. In all of the stories about himself he never mentioned Deborah, and she never spoke of Saul. The beach on which they walked was a golden island outside the real world; but their love was real, and so was the deep communion they shared.

From what she told him, he saw her as a child in ruffled dresses, then as a demure-faced schoolgirl unable to keep from laughing at the affectations of elegance and sensibility which the seminary took so seriously, and as a young lady in her father's house taking as her due the stream of young men who came to call. In his turn, he told her with remembered amusement of his scrapes as a boy, and then of the years when he was at the academy, guiltily aware that he was misleading his mother, who thought he was preparing for Harvard while all along he had known in his heart that he was going to follow his father to sea.

"When the time came for me to go, she was heartbroken," he said. "But I was determined. It seemed to me that I was a grown man. At the end of the first year as a foremast hand I was sorry I hadn't listened to her. Whaling was very different in a ship than it had sounded in the stories told at the store or around the table. In that year I had seen my uncle, a mild man ashore, shoot another man, and never dreamed that the day would come when I would have to do the same thing; and not once, but several times. In that year, too, I had seen a man go

out of his mind, and finally began to believe what the old hands had told me—that there was more madness bred in whaling than any other service at sea.”

“Is it true?”

“It is,” he said quietly. “A man is brought up to live by the laws of land. The laws at sea aren’t the same. The longer a man stays at sea, whaling and trading in the islands, the more he lives by the laws of the sea and the less good he becomes for shore life. Yet men are meant to live on land, not in ships. An old whaler once said to me, ‘It’s a butcher’s life, except the meat fights back.’ Whaling masters stay in the trade because of the money, and foremast hands who go out for more than one voyage go because they’re damned souls. I’m glad it’s over. I’m glad I’m home; and in spite of all the hell you and I have to go through, I’m glad this has happened to us.”

She covered his hand with hers and said nothing.

“I wish that for the rest of our lives,” he went on, “you and I could always be together just this way. That we didn’t have to separate and feel guilt for hiding something that makes more sense than anything else in our lives.”

“We can’t, and so there’s no point in talking about it.”

“Maybe I can’t talk, but I can wish.”

“All we do is wish,” she said with sudden sombreness. “And we’ll go on wishing until that terrible last minute when one of us opens a door to see Saul standing there with his white face and a gun in his hand——”

“There’ll be no gun, Judith!”

“If it’s Saul, there’ll be a gun,” she said quietly. “Or if it’s Deborah who’s weeping behind that door——”

“Judith, Judith!”

In a little while she was better. “I’m sorry,” she said; and they walked on in silence, tightly clutching each other’s hand as if to protect themselves from the one wrong word that was

all that was ever needed to make their conversation plummet to despair, for between despair and ecstatic happiness there was no place for them.

A few days later they were again able to steal a little time to walk on the same stretch of beach. Only under the open sky did there seem to be any privacy for them.

"Yesterday," she said suddenly, "I saw where your footprints left the road when you went down to the creek. I know your footprints now. I left the road just to walk where you had walked, putting my feet in your steps to feel closer to you—like a schoolgirl in love." Her voice became very low. "Sometimes I look through the paper you signed for Saul, just to see your name, and every time I see your name my heart hurts a little. That's how I love you."

"Judith——"

"There's no end to my love for you. No end and no shame. Whenever I'm alone I feel you touching me. When I undress at night I pretend that the hooks are being opened by your fingers. I was always taught that a woman who allowed her husband to see her unclothed must be half lost, and yet I want to be that way for you. I want to see you looking at me. I want to be with you as you were with the little island girl you told me about."

"I love you more than I ever loved her—more than I ever loved anybody."

"I'm not jealous, John. Neither of her nor of anyone else you ever loved. I'm too happy that you love me now. I'm so filled with you, that I'm sure everybody has only to look at me to know the truth. And that is why we must never be seen dancing together again."

"But I was looking forward to the Fair Hall next week. My God, Judith, don't you remember what it was like to dance together at the wedding?"

"Oh, I do! I do! But, John, everyone can tell sweethearts dancing."

"Maybe young people, yes. But not us."

She laughed softly and shook her head. "John, we're so careless! Look at the chances we take. Look how we walk without even trying to hide. How do we know who has seen us? Or who might be watching us this very moment? We don't even care——"

"Nothing will happen, Judith," he said firmly. "Judith, you promised to believe that."

"Yes, you've made me believe it, but there's no power on earth that will make seventy-five people blind to what's held right under their eyes. That's asking for far more than white magic. John, you must promise me that next Friday you will not even come near me. We're like lovesick children."

"Maybe so. But if we are, then we're happy ones," he said. "Happy ones, Judith?"

"Happy ones," she said.

They passed a vaulted niche in the clay of the cliffs, and without a word they turned into its shelter, to be hidden from everything but the encircling ocean and the distant sails.

The sea gulls, wheeling and crying over the surf, saw their kiss and its intensification; but the gulls were too busy to notice. Only a lone black crow, one that would eventually rob the gulls, perched by itself on a rock and watched them shamelessly; but they were too far lost in each other to notice sails, surf, gulls, or the lone black bird.

When they had ceased their trembling, they began to walk back. They were silent now and they walked more quickly, as if aware finally that they might be seen, missed, or noticed; and John suddenly turned her around and kissed her again. He could tell from her lips that she was already his as intimately as if they had lain together a thousand times. But a flick of

wariness made him open his eyes. A moment later he realized that hers were open too and had been all along. Each one had been watching over the other's shoulder, magic or no magic.

2

The whirl of women's dresses, the chatter of their voices, and the colour of hanging Chinese lanterns burst upon him as he held the door for Deborah to enter the vast Agricultural Hall. Deborah had insisted on coming early along with several other women. They had taken turns all day long tending the chicken chowder that was still cooking on the great ranges in the kitchen structure at the rear of the hall. On the stage up front, Albion Marston was tweaking his fiddle into closer tune to the blasts of Sim Lambert's cornet. For the occasion Sim and Albion had put on their old frogged uniform jackets of bandsmen in the 31st Massachusetts Volunteers. Albion's wife accompanied them on the organ.

By seven o'clock some seventy-five people had gathered, excited and shy at the miraculous transformation of themselves and their neighbours by good dark worsted, linen, and silk. There was a shine and pride in their eyes as they appraised each other, and once again the men remembered why they had made the decision to come home from the sea to farm for these women who wore the brooches, lace, scarves, and combs brought back from ten thousand miles away.

John walked around, greeting his friends, and they in turn were delighted to see him as he used to be. He hadn't felt this gay and excited since he was fifteen, setting out for his first Sunday Night Sing, where after the hymns he would have to walk a girl home.

Saul and Judith Pengarth were among the last to arrive. As

she caught John's eyes his face remained impassively smiling, and he made no move toward her.

The babble of conversation ended at seven-thirty when the haggard minister, Mr. Ostend, clapped his hands for order. His presence was a shimmer of black over the brightness because he was a dying man, fighting to survive only through the coming Christmas. His dark eyes carried the sadness of farewell and a parched hunger that made the living feel they ought to savour each moment of their own lives a little more highly, a little more loudly. Wherever he went, his haunted gaze induced a feverishness in others; and as his own vitality spiralled to its end, he made everyone else a little larger than life.

From the centre of the stage his shaking voice greeted the guests on behalf of the Ladies Aid and urged everyone present to enjoy himself in the Lord's behalf because the profits from tonight's gathering would take care of the much-needed shingling of the steeple.

"And, Reverend," came a voice, "when you've got Asa Reynolds a-shingling up there, would you please tell him to set the south face of the clock? Appears to me it's been ten minutes slow as long as I can remember."

The minister smiled with the general laughter, and his eyes were brilliant with tears. He said that the south face had been slow so long, folks would get all mixed up if it were set ahead. But another guest called out that the south face was the side that faced Chilmark and might be a good thing if Chilmark were brought up to date. To which a Chilmark man retorted, "We *got* to take things easy in Chilmark to keep from getting too far ahead of you folks here!"

As the minister laughed at the old jokes of township rivalry, the tears of farewell streamed down his cheeks, and his utter sadness infected his congregation.

The stillness was broken by Sarah Ann Coffin, the president—a very tall, massive woman in flounces of black velvet with angry buttons of jet. She led away the sad old man, kindly, gently, urgently, and then returned to the centre of the stage.

“Now, now, now!” she said, and her high voice filled the hall. “It appears to me that you swains down there ought to be saving all that humour for your fair partners! Our parties get started on time, and its high time now. You know the rules: each lady has put a handkerchief in this basket. Each gentleman steps up and takes his pick. The lady whose handkerchief is picked becomes the gentleman’s partner for the evening. Now, you men, fall in there behind Jeff Otis. Jeff gets to go first, seeing he’s just back from a twenty-month voyage. A merry evening to you all!”

The musicians struck up “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” as the men marched smartly to their places before the platform. Jeff Otis, who was only twenty-two and always one to raise a laugh, pretended that the large basket before him was a kettle of stew which he proceeded to stir vigorously. Then with a flourish he picked out a handkerchief and held it to his nose, frowning with concentration. Everyone laughed. Then he brought the piece of cambric back to his nostrils again, and the frown suddenly changed to a smile.

“Got her with the first iron!” he said. “Who did I win?”

Mrs. Carrie Henderson, a worn woman of sixty, rose, blushing vividly. Jeff Otis leaped down from the platform and landed in a graceful sailor’s bow.

“My respects, ma’am. And now everybody knows exactly why I came home!”

John was standing well along toward the middle of the line, and as each man in turn stepped up to the basket, he felt the same tightening of his face into a smile to guard against any

show of chagrin should someone claim Judith. She was still unclaimed when his turn came.

He walked up to the basket, and in a moment he saw a handkerchief that he knew was Judith's. Then a decision of maturity said that he would be stupid to risk everything merely to be able to sit and dance with her in the presence of seventy-odd other people. Without any more hesitation he reached into the basket and took the handkerchief next to Judith's.

He held up the piece of embroidered Irish linen. For a moment no woman claimed it. Heads began to turn, looking from one to the other.

Then, very slowly, Judith rose. She was pale but smiling, and just as she had warned him, love was softly in her eyes for everyone to see.

He crossed to meet her, looking neither to the right nor the left, defying the whole room to guess the truth. He couldn't tell if anyone had even glanced their way, for the man on line behind him was by this time the centre of attention.

"I swear that I deliberately did not take the handkerchief I knew was yours," John murmured to her. "I saw it plain as day and passed it over."

"It was an accident," said Judith. "This afternoon the women all decided to change handkerchiefs just because so many could be recognized."

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't have a chance, and I was afraid that if I did tell you, you'd have picked the new one."

"It makes no difference what we do," he said in a low voice. "There is something forcing us together." Then a sudden recklessness exploded within him. "Then, by God, let's enjoy it!"

He danced as never before. Outwardly innocent, the reels,

waltzes, and polkas were ceremonials of passion for lovers. The partners whirled, bowed to curtsies, changed hands, all in unison to the chant of the caller, a hundred feet stamping the beat. Judith flew into his arms and then away again around the ring.

For the few moments that she was with him, turning and swaying in the formal embrace, his hands glancingly knew her body, and her body was aware of his hands. Her eyes were brilliant.

The other women seemed merely heavy. He smiled for them and sent them on, glad they were gone, for each one who passed meant that Judith was coming back that much sooner. The configurations kept changing, and not until he actually saw the face of one of his momentary partners did he realize that Deborah was in the same set with him. She danced away, and his fixed smile suddenly ached on his face, for she had felt like any other woman. There wasn't even the memory of love, yet he knew that once she must have stirred him as deeply as Judith did now. Then Judith returned and magic came with her.

Distantly he was aware that two other men were drawn by her colour. One was the minister. His black suit and scarf made him stand out from the rim of spectators like a crow on a beach full of gulls; and his unblinking, wistful stare followed even the least of her movements, adoring the aliveness he was soon to leave.

The other man, who drifted over to watch, was Saul. He stood beside the minister, each unmindful of the other as they both followed the movements of the transformed woman. Saul was looking at her with wonderment. Whirling in the dance, John glimpsed Saul's growing alarm very plainly; yet, even so, no alarm could penetrate to him. He was enthralled and blinded by an intoxicating freedom shot through with the

wildness of running free before a gale, heading straight for catastrophe.

A long time ago an oracle in his deepest heart had foretold his future. He could not remember the words or the admonition; only the knowledge that unless he agreed to be satisfied with far less of life than life had to offer he would be whirled like an autumn leaf into some eternal winter blackness.*

For twenty years he had schooled himself by this instinct. But now, by taking Judith to himself, he was tasting a love which the hooded sibyl in his heart had said was deeper than a man had a right to know. What he would be asked to pay, and on what terms, he had no idea; but just as he knew that he had once made a compact, he knew now that the foretold inundation must be rushing toward him. Yet as he danced with Judith he shrugged away the rest of his life. Whatever was coming was already on its way.

Let it come! he thought. Let it come!

Chapter Seven

1

LATE the next night, at the hour when the tide of darkness paused before flowing into morning, the black air became as still and taut as a harp string. There was such a hush that the curl and lap of wavelets on the shores of the flat sea could be heard far away. The immense dark quiet turned colder and colder. No living thing was astir to feel it. Then, as if in stealth, snow began to drift down in utter silence. The fall was very light but steady, and there was the sense that it would last forever.

In the pale morning the snow still fell. For all the hours it had been coming down, the ground was only barely covered. Ordinarily the churchgoing islanders would have glanced out the window and dismissed the fall with a contemptuous "Just some flakes, is all." But now they were snow-shy and snow-wise. There was an ominous intent to the snow, and people who saw it were afraid.

Deborah decided not to go to church. She said that she felt poorly anyhow. John, though, should go, if only because of the minister, Mr. Ostend. For if Mr. Ostend could venture out on a day like this, the least that others could do was to go and pay what might very well be their last respects to him..

Only a handful came out that Sunday morning when the winter returned for good; and Mr. Ostend made a dark and lonely figure as he stood before them at the lectern, postponing the services for a few minutes and then another few minutes in the vain hope that perhaps one or two others might still be

on the way, as eager to hear his last thoughts as he was to impart them. His pain was so intense these days that he feared each Sabbath might be his last despite his passionate prayer to be spared for the few remaining weeks until Christmas. His parishioners thought that he asked so little out of a deep piety; but they were mostly younger than he was, and none of them had lived with such persistent agony that every hour in its grip was an eternity in hell.

The handful seated in the church waited patiently with him, knowing all the time that no one else was going to come. At length Mr. Ostend gave up his forlorn hope, sighed, and signalled the beginning of the services by opening his Bible. He bowed his head for a moment of silent prayer.

In the stark, angular black and white of the church the red bow on the back of Judith's bonnet was as vivid as a rose dropped upon a field of snow and black burnt timbers. She too had come alone.

"Fear the Lord!" said Mr. Ostend suddenly, and his face began to quiver as a torment of tears took possession of him. He had always been considered a softly man; if anything, too calm. Now he shocked his hearers with the passion of his desperation.

"Oh, listen to me, brothers and sisters in Christ! To me, a sinner who has walked the path of righteousness with only the outer self—for within this clay has been such blackness, such grinning evil, that only the eyes of a merciful Lord can behold me and not turn away! This day I stand alone in the great grey vestibule of God's judgment. I am all alone—and sick, sick, sick with fear! In the few fleeting moments before I am to be summoned to the everlasting silence, let me shout my last call back to you who have followed me. Let me leave you with such stern admonishments that I can then go before the awful courts and say, 'Yes, Lord, I am a sinner! In the deep

secrecy of my heart I have mocked my parents, I have coveted my neighbour's ass, I have fornicated, I have murdered my brother, I have borne false witness, and I have taken Thy name in vain! But, Lord, though the shepherd's heart is evil, he brings You a flock that is pure!" His voice broke with pleading passion. "Hear me, hear me, men and women! For sweet Christ's sake, purge yourselves of sin so that your purity will intercede for me and save me from the wrath I deserve!"

His cry died away, but there was no silence. Instead a low moan came from the very bowels of the earth beneath them, a sighing from the air above, and the tall narrow panes of glass on the east side of the building drummed deeply, for the wind had finally come, and the snowflakes outside were leaping and flying.

The wind brought to John the cry of a great storm a thousand miles away. The grinding within the earth was the vibration of rocks and boulders in the seething wash on the South Beach, where massive waves heaved and crashed in the torrents piled up far to the south in the mid-Atlantic. As always, the sound of ocean storm deluged John with a wash of half-forgotten fears left over from the thousand gales he had survived. Each time he had seemed serene and in full command, barely noticing the terrors which had hidden in his heart to wait until now, when there was no strain.

His eyes were assaulted with fragments of remembered pictures—the *Calumet's* bare masts outlined against an onrushing wave that seemed higher than the main truck, heaving higher than the tops, even higher than the royals; a hell of black water that was going to climb forever and sweep right over the brig, when the deck beneath him suddenly heaved and sailed skyward up the mountain. At the crest halfway to the clouds, they were rewarded bitterly by

the sight of mile after mile of onrushing wave and valley, each as high as the one that had passed. He never thought to live beyond the third such assault, but the torture had gone on all night and the black day after.

He still saw the half-shredded topgallant streaming from the yard of the *Four Brothers* in the Tierra del Fuegian gale and knew that he himself was going to have to climb up and cut away the thundering strips of iron cloth because every member of the crew had flatly refused to commit suicide. He saw the *Old Colony*, the *Jared Andrews*, the *Massapequa Queen*, all of them storm-tossed together, bare-poled and half buried in foam, spume, and mists of spray. He had survived them all, but he did not feel the relief of a man who was now beyond danger; but rather the coldhearted chill of the fugitive who hears that yet another accomplice in an ancient, half-forgotten crime has been caught and hanged.

Troubled by his own fear, he was perceptive to all fear. He was aware of the half-hidden signs that writhed through the minister's words like the mysterious sea creatures that surface at night, mistaking the darkness of the midnight sky for the blackness of five hundred fathoms of water. The lonely old man at the lectern was afraid to die and ashamed of his fear.

To Mr. Ostend, any man who feared to die not only doubted God's goodness but could not believe in eternal life. The old man, John sensed, did not even know that his faith was weak, and would sooner die the death he feared than admit that he had lived so long without the true call.

The minister's agony was torture to John. The sermon was that of a man who had fought temptation all his life and still tried to disguise from himself the secret regret over his victories. With the strength of death in his voice, he insisted that he was glad that the battle was over at last; that he longed for the rewards to come. Yet his vehemence could not hide

from John the fear that there was to be neither reward nor punishment. He was simply a human being in a torment of unwanted disbelief, and for that very reason his pathetic cry gave more life and thunder to words engraved on rocks and papyrus thousands of years ago than any ecstasy of belief. *

At the end of the sermon the congregation sat in stunned silence. They sang "Rock of Ages" and they were moved, but they had not understood what they had heard.

2

At the door John waited for Judith because they had to walk the same road together. They left the church behind them and went in silence across the blowing air. Because they were lovers, their silence was like that of a man and his wife.

Finally he said, "Where is Saul?"

"He went to Edgartown," she said slowly. "He went yesterday before supper to see Judge Osborne. He will be back tomorrow."

"Then I can stop in before going on home."

He took her arm, but she continued to walk as if she were alone.

"John," she said, "where is Deborah?"

"She didn't feel well. She has a touch of sickness."

"Then go straight home to her!" Judith said with a suppressed agony in her voice. "I couldn't bear that we should be together today."

"Judith!"

"I'd feel as ashamed as if someone were watching us." She lowered her head. "Watching us kiss, watching us touch—watching everything we do."

"Who, Judith? Who?"

"Mr. Ostend. I listened to him and I ~~was~~ sick. Oh, John, he knows!"

"How can he know?"

"When he said those things—'he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death'—he was talking straight to me."

"Those words were said four thousand years before you and I ever started, Judith. You and I heard them when we were children. We grew up and married, believing them. And yet we still did what we did because we had to."

"Does that make us any the less guilty?"

"No," he admitted. "But it makes us no more guilty than we were when we began. And what we did, we did again and again, knowing the words all the time."

Judith went on, "He made me feel that I alone was responsible for him. I sat there, thinking of excuses. I found myself pleading with him that until I came to you I had never in my life known love, that almost from the very beginning I could hardly bear the touch of my husband; yet at exactly that moment he was saying, 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.' Just as if he knew what was in my mind."

"Then *you* don't know what was in his mind."

"Didn't I hear the man?"

"You heard what he said—not what he meant," John said wildly. The east wind was lashing at his cheeks, stealing the very breath from his nostrils, so that he had to turn his face from its force. "Judith, that man no longer believes what he has been preaching all his life. Years ago he laid a course for himself, and now that he's due for his landfall he finds that this is neither the way he would have gone nor the place he had to be. ~~Some~~ somewhere during the voyage he changed his

mind, but he kept the change a secret from himself. Now he weeps, because it's too late to do what he really wanted, because all the things he stuck to weren't worth the price of keeping them. Those tears weren't streaming down his face because he was afraid to face God's accounting. It's his own accounting *now* that can't be faced!"

"John, you're haunted by yourself. Why must everybody seem to be like you—trapped by the things they said and did when they were someone younger, someone different? That's what you say about yourself."

"Because it's the truth, Judith. If you grow, you change. Old things in you die, new things are born. And yet who dares to know that the storehouse of his life is really filled with trash? That's hell to know unless you're free to start over. And who is free? By the time a man is old enough to have changed, his life is already spliced a thousand different ways to other lives with servings that are tight and fast. To pull free means maiming others and himself too. How many men will gamble that the pain of breaking ties can be less than the pain of living as if there had been no change at all? Judith, you and I are trying to be who we were for the people we used to love, but we're being who we are now for each other. It's hard, and it hurts; but it's our only chance for happiness. There's wonderful happiness in what we're doing."

"And misery too," she said slowly. "More misery than happiness. If you're right, I have to go on being who I always was. I can't bear to become who I am now because if I thought that Saul knew, I'd want to die!"

He shook her to dispel this new morbid self that had possessed her. "Who are you to talk about dying?" he demanded. "You've been dead all your life with Saul. Only in the past few months have you begun to know how living can really feel. When before did you ever feel so light that you

could walk on the wind? Fifteen years ago you didn't look as young as you did the night we were dancing."

"I know," she said dully. "And yet I couldn't bear to think of the pain Saul would feel. Every nerve in me hates him when he comes close, and yet I feel icy at the thought that I'm the one who would make him feel the deepest shame, deeper and more painful than for any other man! John, he would crumple to pieces before my eyes. Like paper in a flame. And the last thing I'd see would be the hurt in his eyes."

"That's foolish talk! Saul has lived more than you can ever hope to. I know Saul, and I knew him when he was younger. This great shame you talk about—Saul brought it to other men long before he ever knew you, and it never seemed to him then to be anything to die for!"

"It is, it is for me," she insisted. The fine snow flying past her caught and clung thickly to her hair, her brows, and lashes, so that she looked suddenly like an ancient sibyl as she cried: "And if I couldn't die before he found out, I would want *him* to die. Yes! It would be a greater mercy for him to be dead than to know!"

A gust of driving wind snatched away her words, scattering them high into the air with demoniacal mischief, as if to destroy forever any chance for her to take back the wish. The fire in her eyes died, and she looked white and frightened at what she had said. "But it's true," she went on slowly. "Sometimes in the early morning when I awake, I find myself wondering how it would feel to die; but far more often I keep hoping during the day that every sound is someone coming to the kitchen door with a long sad face to tell me that something terrible has happened to Saul. And my one great fear is that I would blurt out, 'Thank God! Because now he'll never know!'"

"Judith, do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm saying that I wish I were dead!"

"Or that Saul were dead!"

"Or that Saul were dead. And so do you! You keep saying that there's happiness in this. Where is it? Where?"

He put his hand on her snow-covered arm. "Would you be happier if we didn't see each other any more?"

"We'll always be seeing each other."

"You know what I mean."

She didn't answer, and his desperation became cold with anger, as if she were betraying him to utter loneliness.

"Answer me," he demanded. "Where's your nerve? Either tell me outright you don't want me any more, or else have the strength to hang on the way I'm hanging on."

"Until Saul dies," she said bitterly. "Or Deborah? Is that what we're hanging on for?"

"Not for what might come, but only for what we've got now."

"But there's no happiness now," she said. "So if there's none to come and none now, why are we torturing ourselves?"

He let his hand fall from her.

"We'll do it your way," he said slowly. He was immeasurably weary, but the anger still persisted: a dull anger over the ultimate betrayal. "This is the end for us. We'll walk up that road together. You'll go to your house and I'll go to mine, and we will never touch each other again."

"Why must we do everything in anger!" she said with despair. "When we first came together it was without any joy. I thought that was because we were doing wrong. But now we're doing what is right, and still there's no peace! There'll never be any peace!"

Chapter Eight

1

THERE would be no peace for them because they were not free of each other. Insidiously, it seemed, they were presented with opportunities even more favourable than ever before. The work on the land case brought John constantly to the Pengarth house; and although he now tried to make his visits coincide with Saul's presence at home, Saul was very often away on other business.

"Since when has Saul taken such an interest in trap fishing?" John asked Judith one day when she told him that Saul wouldn't be back for at least an hour or so.

"The men who are against the town's ruling have been asking him for advice," she said. "You know he's against it too."

"I know," he said. "And am I supposed to sit here and wait for him to come back?"

"Neighbours have been doing that for each other for a long time."

"I'm not talking about him."

"About you?"

"About us, Judith. It's one thing to be polite and neighbourly when other folks are around. But when we're alone it's just a damned lie. It makes me feel like a play-actor."

"It can't be any other way, John," she said desperately. "It just can't be. Not any more."

"And where are you wanting it to be any other way now?" Her face was pale. He knew that he was hurting her, and simply

because of that power he was able to slam out of the house, saying, "Tell Saul he knows where to find me!"

The break had been made, but John was unable to believe that anything had come to an end. Too much was left unsaid—too much feeling was still unspent. At any moment the crescendo in which he had been living would once again resume its surging rise.

He had been so tightly imprisoned within his concern over Judith that he had almost lost track of any part of his life that did not directly affect her. Now he was afraid to look around and see the shambles left by his neglect.

At home Deborah was more quiet than she had ever been in his memory—tight-lipped, contained, and so coldly polite that it was like living with a stranger—yet he could neither give vent to the anger that boiled within him nor touch her shoulder softly in contriteness.

For the sake of their twenty years of living together he wanted to beg her to be simply the friend who could bear with him through his time of trouble. Yet at such moments a sharp word from her was enough to flick his yearning for tenderness into silent reprisal: If this is the way you want it, then this is the way it must be!

At night they lay side by side, but whenever their bodies touched, he could feel her stiffen away from him. If he could only feel desire for her, he thought; if only he could honestly put out his hand to caress her and make her feel him wanting her! But whatever love remained in him for her was too remote to be found through the more pressing urgency which Judith had created.

Judith's picture was in the forefront of his mind. Her name was on the tip of his tongue. All through him was the certainty that sooner or later one single act, a cry, would explode the world about him back into simplicity. But when

this one moment of violence would come, what shape it would take, what result it would have, and who would set it off were all questions he could not answer. It was simply a matter of waiting—of endless waiting.

He turned away from himself to prepare for the special town meeting as if he expected to encounter hours of strife; but the day came and the discussion was over so quickly that the moment, so full of jeopardy in anticipation, slipped away and was dissolved in the fluid of time. He had had his way, but he was deeply dissatisfied. He had to laugh at himself for ever thinking that the passing flurry of a town meeting could ever replace the lost days of action.

What he missed most, he realized, was the moment of danger: a danger he had himself elected to face as a cool matter of business, a moment he had himself selected out of cool judgment. When he had fought wind and water, he had been the prey, and there had never been any choice but to fight back. When he had fought a whale, however, he was the deliberate hunter, and the jeopardy was his own choosing. No matter how he may have hated the misery of a whaleman's life, there was never any denying the fierce elation and high terror of the moment when he stood in the bow of the thin-walled slender boat, thrusting a lance with both hands down into the life of a hundred-ton creature whose slightest twitch could smash him.

One walked up to the moment with the assurance, "I will survive." And when the moment was faced and survival was real, there was a wild gaiety in his heart that lasted for a long time beneath the shouted orders, the grime of burning blubber, and the stink of boiling oil.

The moment was never twice the same, and sometimes the antagonist was more than a whale, and the prize was more than a thousand dollars and his life.

The *Four Brothers* was a barquentine, very able, and could sail closer to the wind than any other whaler, but icy western gales held her seesawing at a standstill for two months beneath Cape Horn. John said, "To hell with that," wore ship, and sailed around the world in the other direction, ending up in the Indian Ocean.

The cry of "Blows!" sent him aloft into the main topmast rigging one morning.

"Where away?" And the first mate pointed off the weather bow. Minutes passed, and then a tiny feathery puff of steam blew off the water about four miles away. The breeze was lively and the water dark blue in the sunlight. A few minutes later his glass picked up a second spouting. The whale was filling up with air, preparing to go below the surface. In John the excitement began, and he talked steadily, to himself and to anyone around him who needed orders.

"Call all hands, Mr. Barry, and bring her higher. More. So! Hold her now. Steady. Keep her full and by!"

He saw the black butterfly of the tail turn up for the whale's dive at the same moment the lookout shouted: "There go flukes!" The whale had squnded.

"What time is it?" John shouted, for he would be able to tell the approximate age and size of the whale from the length of time it submerged. He remained aloft, anxiously waiting the next rising, while the ship bowled along on the port tack under royals and foretop studding sails.

His orders, called down to the deck, got the four boats readied for the run. Except for the first mate, who was at the helm, all the officers were aloft, braced on crosstrees.

"What time?" John sang, and the answer was twenty-five minutes.

"I knew he was a buster!" John said. "~~I had~~ a fan the size of my house. Your lines checked, Mr. Fraley?" to the second

mate on the foremast, and without waiting for an answer he kept talking. The glass held to his eye showed only a disk of empty ocean and sky. "He was sperm all right. What time?"

"Forty minutes."

"Swing and hoist the boats, Mr. Barry. Oh, damn this glass! Yet he couldn't have risen without being seen!"

"Aye, aye, sir," floated up from the deck, but John was still scanning the area where the whale had gone down.

"I saw a churning off the bow, sir," sang out Mr. Fraley.

"You couldn't have. He won't rise there, he was going to windward. Mr. Fraley, you sure you checked your tub?"

"Aye, sir."

The third mate made them all turn with his call of "Sail!" and John glanced over his shoulder to see another vessel, a brig, coming down just as hard as the *Four Brothers*.

"Who the hell is that? I know her, all right. It's the *Dancer*, and Saul Pengarth's got every crosstree swarming and every ratlin manned. Look at that crowd! He's seen him, all right! *Don't fall off an inch, Mr. Barry, we've got company! What time is it? Look sharp, you men. Watch for the rise. All right, Mr. Barry, this is far enough. Haul up the main and square the main yard! That's a long-winded old bull we've got, and we're going to get him. He just couldn't come up without us seeing him! Ease those jib sheets—— Blows!*" he shouted suddenly. "Half a mile dead ahead. Down, all, and lower away!" Running down the rigging, he gave his orders to the mates, who were sliding down with him. "Spread out well. Work between the *Dancer* and whale. If possible, strike this rising, or else the *Dancer's* boats will have an extra hour to work down in. Get into position across the wind under oars, then set sail."

He was standing at the rail, just above his own boat. Two men stood by below at the falls. "Ready, all?" he called to the

other officers, but they were already on their way down the vessel's sides, and John's boat was filling up. He slid down, the last man. "Throw off the falls. On deck, there, boy, pull up your tackle! More to windward, Mr. Fraley! All right *us*, out oars, and spring, boys, spring!"

He waited until his boats were strung out to suit his fancy. "Peak oars. Step the mast there, bow!" The mast was raised, and a moment later both sails, close-hauled, had the boat leaping over the water. With all hands perched high on the weather rail, the lee gunwale was almost awash with the swirl from the whaleboat's bow. All the *Brothers'* boats were sailing now, all of them heeling at about the same angle. Dead ahead, the whale, a hundred-foot bull, lay with his body awash.

"There's a thousand-dollar fish!" said John, tugging at the rudder. "And so big only a blind man can miss him! Find me the *Dancer's* boats!"

"Bearing right down on us, sir! Cap'n Pengarth's in the leading boat."

"There goes the second spout," said John, staring ahead. "Are the *Dancer's* boats under sail?"

"Sailing and paddling, sir. Their slant on the wind is easier than ours."

"And the third spout! We're getting close enough. Down sails, and take to the oars. I'm going to put you right aboard him, Charley. Both irons, mind. Both irons all the way in." The sails were stowed with a minimum of lost time, and the men were digging hard. John was leading all his own boats, but the regatta was now a convergence of nine craft, all racing toward the unaware monster, who lazily puffed a fourth exhalation. His wet back was a hundred-foot avenue ten feet wide, and his full size was still not showing.

"Now spring, boys, spring!" He didn't mind his voice,

because the wind was blowing all sound away from the whale.

"Ahoy, Cap'n Gosnold!" was Saul's formality at sea. "That whale's ours. We've been following him two days!"

"He's yours when you get him into barrels, Cap'n!" The wind made John's hair whip alongside his cap. He measured the distance from both boats to the whale and made a quick estimate of their speeds. He ordered his harpooner into position, just about the same time as Saul's Kanaka braced himself upright in the bow.

"I'll mate the whale with you, Cap'n!" called John, guessing that Saul might have a few seconds' advantage. "Let's go for him together!"

"Like hell you will, Cap'n! That whale's mine, and I don't share!"

"If you don't take half, you won't get anything! Let it be the first man in, then." John didn't care—the chances were now about even and there was still half a hundred yards to go.

"Spring, boys, spring!" he urged the rowers. "Charley, get that tackle clear of your legs!"

The whale slowly moved forward with a deep churning of his flukes, and gave John the advantage. He was using his long steering oar now and put it hard over. In a moment the new positions gave him three boat lengths' lead over Saul.

"I'll take your offer, Cap'n!" Saul called. "Let's split!"

John threw his head back and laughed. The boat was racing up closer to the whale at an angle behind the fin, just out of range of the whale's vision. Even at the rate they were going it would take several seconds from the time they passed the whale's enormous tail to reach a position for harpooning.

"Pull easy, boys, pull steady! Charley, ready now, the *Dancer's* going to yell when you go on him, you know."

"I know, sir," said the Indian, who was Billy Bascom's nephew. "I don't give a damn about them."

"One more stroke, boys, and we'll be on him. Now, Charley, give it to him! And the other, boy! You're fast! Hold water, all! Christ!"

The stung whale lobtailed, his tail rising from the water a good twenty feet high and as broad, coming down in a fantastic splash of fury that drenched them all—the crash of water drowning out the jeering yell from the *Dancer's* men who had tried to spoil the harpooner's aim. For an instant the hundred-foot living muscle quivered in spasm, then hurtled forward down-wind, with the head protruding from the water. The harpoon line was spinning around the loggerhead in the stern of the boat, smoking as it went, even though water was being poured on it. The whaleboat leaped forward in the wake of the whale with a tremendous jerk, and John had only a moment to turn and thumb his nose at Saul.

"Keep that line wet! You, Charley, come aft here and let me get at the old war horse!"

He changed places lightly with the harpooner, and the boy crouched in the stern, taking another turn around the loggerhead with the hissing line, so that the boat was now fully fast to the lunging whale. Wings of spray were thrown far to either side of the bow. John took his time bracing his knee in the cleat just abaft the three-foot forward deck; and with the boat racing and skidding beneath him, he hefted a lance for its proper balance.

"Stand by to slack off line! He's going to sound soon. Steady, all!"

The line suddenly slackened as the whale ceased its mad flight, and the boat overran its tow.

"Haul line!" John shouted. "Face around here, all, and haul

lively. Lively, boys! Damned if I know what he's got in mind. Haul, and be ready to throw off if he should sound." He didn't dare turn around. "How many turns on that loggerhead, Charley? Two's too many. Just once around. Look sharp, look sharp, *he's going to come!*"

The great creature threshed seventy feet out of the ocean, and fell back with a resounding thunder of water. Rainbows glittered in the spray that still hung in the air. From the spume, the black hulk of muscle and power now came racing toward them, barely an inch beneath the surface, but he was coming blind. The long massive shadow caused not a ripple on the water until the whale lunged up like a monstrous porpoise. He slid beneath the surface once more, and the course of the speeding shadow changed, bearing directly toward the boat.

"He's seen us," said John. "Tub, haul line, and coil! Out oars, the rest. Charley, take me on him!"

"On him?"

"Right on him, hear? If he gets past us, the *Dancer's* men will hook him themselves. They're just waiting for us to lose him. Spring now! Tub, drop that line! Let the damned line *run*, I say. Hard aport, Charley, and lay us around. One stroke and up oars, all!"

As he stood in the bow, with his knee locked into the thwart, the boat became his body, the oars were his legs. He was a lightly poised man moving at will, a little forward, then—"Stern two!"—a little back, for the proper footing, the best stance——

"More, Charley, more!"

Then to one side a little so that the shock of a hundred tons would do its own damage to the silent mass of darkness sliding toward him.

"He's coming. Another minute. Tub, haul line, lively,

while there's time. Haul it, damn you! Faster. That's the way, snake it in!"

The boat was only a little to one side of the whale's path, rocking as gently as a rowboat, with its bow now pointing in the direction of the whale's run. The shadow held steady and the whale glided by, missing them by half a boat length. All the other boats behind were now moving in on the whale's headlong path to make a cast at him.

"Make that line fast and haul me on him. Haul me on!"

The light boat flew along again, and the whale, having missed his intended victim, picked another boat to smash. He flirited his body beneath the surface and headed for Fraley.

All the men in John's boat, with their hands protected by canvas scraps, were pulling on the line up to the whale, so that they were going even faster than the whale.

The whole weight of the boat, six men, and all the gear hung on the line; and this one-ton drag on the whale's wound was no more encumbrance than a twelve-ounce weight would be to an angry man.

Up even with the murderous fluke, a great black fan twenty feet across vibrating in the water beneath them—if it broke water for an instant they were dead men—then inch by inch along the massive liteness to the small of the body, then forward still more even with the hump—if the whale rolled or turned——

"And now," said John, stabbing down with the lance. "And now!"

And in the great depth of muscle and cartilage his slender lance six feet long found the life which gushed up along his hands. He withdrew the lance as he shouted:

"Stern, all!"

The boat retreated while the whale went into the death flurry. The ghastly convulsion took ten minutes as the whale,

too late, showed the strength of which it had all along been capable: a power sufficient to smash every one of the cockleshells of its pursuers along with the mother ships from which they had come. This was one moment which John and many other old whalemén never truly got used to—because the life that was ending was too huge for comprehension. They could watch the death with impassive faces, but it was the mask which was the habit; the tragedy of the death was new and sombrely terrifying every time. The moments of death were always subtracted from the experience, each man absorbing it privately. All that remained was a surface elation with a darker, unspoken shadow.

“You should have shared, Cap’n,!” John called across the water to a still-faced Saul.

Years later the memory of elation was still alive; but it was from another time and a little unreal, like glints of gold dust on a smoky fabric that wavered and grew fainter in the way of receding dreams. He missed it more and more.

After the town meeting had passed without any opposition, he vividly remembered the old times. No town meeting nor a dozen fishermen’s disputes could call up in him the violence he needed to ease what was in his heart; for wherever he went, it seemed, he either saw Judith, heard about her, or met her on the road, and then they would hurry past with only the briefest of greetings.

One bitter morning he was sitting with some of the other men around the stove in the store, talking about the heavy flocs of ice that drifted past the island. Saul came in, glanced about until he saw John, and without saying anything to him at the moment walked to the counter and purchased some tobacco. He turned to go, and only then glanced directly at John.

“Walking home?” he asked.

Reade said: "Take another minute, Saul. The ice has started all the old yarns spinning."

"I've told all mine," said Saul.

"So's everyone else." Zebulon laughed. "They just keep telling them over and over."

Saul gave a curt smile with his lips, but his eyes were demandingly on John.

"Sure enough," said John, getting out of his chair. "I was just ready to leave, Saul. Let's go."

Outside the sky was the colour of slate, and the downs rolled away without shadow or softness.

"I went to your house for you," Saul said as they went along the road. Each word came out in a cloud of white vapour. "I couldn't sit there and wait for you. The land case isn't going to be as easy as I thought."

"What's the trouble?"

"Haven't got proper proof of our claim to the right of way. We can build a case on what we've got, but we're not going to sail through full and by."

"Then to hell with it!" said John. "To hell with it!"

"What are you so riled about? I did my best. If it hadn't been for me trying, you never would have known there was a chance to make a case."

"I'm not blaming you, Saul. Just the other way around. I'll ride over to Edgartown to see George Henry Pease. He used to pasture out there when he was a boy a good seventy years ago. If anyone ever used those paths, he'll remember; and his word means more to a court than any piece of paper. I'll get a deposition from him!"

"That'll be fine," Saul said anxiously. "But mind now, if George Henry looks as if he can't remember anyone using the right of way, you just turn on your heel and don't wait around to hear it. You don't want to let any Boston lawyer

be able to get you on the stand and make you say that you found out there was no right of way."

"Don't worry, Saul. I've been in as many insurance hearings as you have. You'll get your deposition all right. Someone will get it back to you."

"Why do you mean, 'someone'? What about you?"

John looked down at him blandly. The idea of going to Edgartown had leaped into his mind on the impulse of the moment; not because he cared about the case, but because the case gave him the opportunity he had been waiting for.

He would go to Edgartown and get Saul's deposition for him, but he was also going to get a vessel that would be sailing with the tide. He and Judith could not go on living together on the same island, and his leaving would be a release. The whole plan came to him so fully formed that it must have been maturing in his mind ever since he had broken with her.

"I'll probably be in Edgartown for several days," he said to Saul. "I've got business of my own."

He was more soberly minded by the time he reached home; determined, relieved, and sad. He told Deborah to brush his clothes for him. When she glanced up at him for an explanation he simply said that he was going to ride to Edgartown on business. Her expression didn't change, but she asked for no further particulars, and he knew that he must have been brusque.

"It's about the land case with Saul," he said. "I've got to get some depositions."

"All right."

"What do you mean, 'all right'?"

She looked at him for a moment of terrible silence. "I mean that I don't care," she said at last. "I just don't care!"

She left him, and he realized that his hands were trembling.

He felt so pressed with the urge to escape that he couldn't bear to take the time to hitch up the democrat. Instead he saddled the big chestnut mare, Lady. He was about to swing up and canter off when he realized that he could not go away without a word when he would be gone so long.

Then in the next moment he told himself that all this plan of shipping out was foolish. He was only going on business. He would be back tomorrow or the next day, and he wanted to say good-bye to Deborah just as any man would want to say a word to his wife.

He stood in the doorway, sorry that he had hurt her, waiting for her to look at him.

"You're letting all the warmth out of the house. Close the door," she said. She was cutting at him deliberately, but he would not lash back at her.

"I'm ready to go," he said quietly.

"All right."

"I'll be laying over at the Gibbs House," he went on, as if she had said nothing.

"All right."

"Deborah——"

She raised her head slightly, but not to look at him.

"Maybe we'll both be feeling better when I get back."

Now at last she turned to him.

"Feel better about what?" she demanded.

He could not meet her terrible gaze.

"Nothing," he said sadly. He turned away and unlatched the door. "Good-bye, Deborah."

The road was frozen, and the ground felt like iron through the mare's gait. The snapping cold made the horse mettlesome, but John held her down to a trot because he faced a ten-mile ride.

Like most seafarers, he had never been an easy rider. After

long months, and even years, of confinement within the wooden walls of ships, sailors came ashore with an almost unquenchable passion for wild movement. They would hire horses in any port, no matter how small, to gallop with seeming senselessness up and down a beach, becoming centaurs with a thousand leagues of dry land as their domain for instant ranging.

Whaling captains at home disguised this passion by acquiring horses for racing. Only last spring John had raced Lady at the fairgrounds against two down-island horses. He had driven her hard and without mercy from his light sulky, revelling in the momentary outburst of abandon. Now his caution as a horseman was the measure of how completely he had become a landsman.

At the crest of Brandy Brow Hill in West Tisbury he loosened the reins. The steep drop of the hill, however, was enough to send the horse into a gallop that made John brace himself for the sharp turn at the bottom, but Lady kept running, clattering over the Mill Pond bridge and up the opposite slope. Two faces in Rotch's store turned palely to peer at the galloping man.

All about him now was the silent flatness of the plains. Ahead, as far as he could see, was the ribbon of track dipping and rising across the shallow hills. On either side was the dwarf forest of bush and stunted pines under the cold grey sky. He slowed the horse to a walk in the broad stillness, not even aware of the rhythmic sway of his body.

It was late afternoon when he dismounted in front of George Henry Pease's small, square, weather-beaten cottage two miles from Edgartown's Four Corners. Every post and shingle of the grey house was warped and bowed by two hundred years of sea, wind, and sun.

George Henry was a wiry man close to ninety, as dry as

leather. His eyes were rheumy. He didn't move from his rocking chair before the fireplace when John came in. Without ceasing his motion, he stared fixedly at the guest for a few minutes.

"You're Timothy Gosnold's boy John," he said at length.

"Stopped being a boy a long time ago," John said.

"Not as long ago as me," said the old man. "Be ninety July fifteenth. My daddy used to say that the French Frogs busted up their Bastille one day, and the next day there I was—born on the Vineyard, three thousand miles away. A coincidence, folks calls it, but there's no Frog blood in me far as anyone can tell." He fell silent and thoughtful, rocking all the time. "Always did admire the French, though, even as a sprat. When the Redcoat bastards came on for the second time, I was sure sorry to miss a chance to bang away at them. Whaling it at the time, I was. Those days, you didn't have to go much off Hatteras to be up to your arse in whales." Again his voice died and he stared into the fire. "Never trust Redcoats, boy; mark what they did for the Rebs only last year or so."

"War's been over many years, Uncle," said John.

"Maybe so. I'm not so acute on things nowadays. The old-time things I remember best."

"That's what I came aboard for, Uncle. I want to know if you can remember about a right of way across my father's land down near the Spit."

"Hell, I know every right of way, every path on the island. Just wish I didn't remember so much," he aduced slowly. "Everybody I used to know is dead, and I keep remembering them. Nobody even near my age left—leastways, nobody I like." He rocked and shook his head. "When I go into town, folks stop and ask me questions—the damndest questions—not to talk to *me*, but just to see how

well I remember old things that happened before anyone around was born. Damned if I don't feel like some kind of trick dog I once saw up to the Brockton Fair. You could ask this dog to do sums. All he did was thump his tail, of course, but folks just stared and marvelled."

"About that land——"

The old man looked at him blankly.

"About what land, now? Down by the Spit. Right?"

"Right," said John.

"I pastured there when I gave up whaling it. Let's see, a lot of talk then of putting up a new church—Asey Mayhew was for it and so I was against it. They were running a president that year—a United States president—who the hell was it?—Adams, like enough—and I was arguing with Asey because he came out to the pasture where I was. He was my own cousin on my mother's side, but I hated that man as long as he lived." He spoke very slowly, concentrating on the memory. "He came down through a break in the fence where a stand of cedars stood—used to be a path there. That's right. The path wound down about fifty feet into the hollow, then doubled back toward the creek——"

"That path's not there any more."

"Well, it sure was there then, because I watched Asey every step of the way and I said to myself, 'Here comes the meanest man I ever knew. He's mean to his folks, mean to me, mean to everybody he knows. Whatever he's going to ask me, I'm going to say no——'"

"I guess that's the path I'm looking for, Uncle. It was a right of way, wasn't it?"

"I'm just telling you it was."

"If Captain Saul Pengarth comes here with a paper, will you tell him how the path ran so he can write it down for you to sign your name?"

"Pengarth: His granddaddy owned the abutting land?"

"That's right. Will you sign it, Uncle?"

The old man thought for a moment while he rocked.

"Spoiled my whole day, getting me to think about Asey again. I was hoping I'd forget all the things he done to me."

"Will you sign it, Uncle?"

"Will he come here?"

"He'll come same as I did. You won't have to move."

The old man rocked some more.

"All right," he said at last. "But I'll want fifty cents for my trouble."

Darkness had long fallen when John rode into the streets of Edgartown. On either side of him the small houses were lit with lamps, but he rode straight down Main Street, past his daughter's big home, at which he glanced just once—wistfully—and then across Water Street to the Gibbs House.

He carried his saddlebag up to a room facing the harbour, but the heavy silence of the plains seemed still to ring in his ears, because he was unable to hear the usual water-side sounds—the lap of water against the bulkheads, the chafe of rigging, and the slow groan of some seventy-ton vessel warped alongside a wharf. He ate by himself and then went out into the cold night. There were no stars. Not even a gull cried in the darkness. The unusual quiet was like a mounting threat.

He went up the lane to the Martyn house, just as he did in years past when Judith's father used to give him his choice of Edgartown's finest whaling vessels. He stood on the granite step. The echo of the brass knocker recalled Judith as a girl rushing to the door to greet him. The black fanlighted door slowly opened, and an elderly woman stood there, peering out in surprise.

"Why, Cap'n Gosnold!" she said.

"Hello, Mrs. Jenkins. Are you nursing here now?"

"The old gentleman is poorly, and I'm tending him now that he's alone."

"Is he too poorly to see me?"

"I think he'd enjoy to see you, Cap'n. He seemed better tonight. Come aboard out of the cold, and I'll tell him you're here."

The old man was propped up in his bed. He was not much over seventy, but he looked far older than George Henry Pease. A Turkey-red woollen robe was thrown across his shoulders and a white nightcap was set squarely on his head. His face was white as candle wax, and John knew that he was going to die soon.

"Sit down, Captain." The old man's frail voice was more cordial than it had been in all the years John sailed for him. "You're looking mighty well, young man."

"So are you."

The old man's dying face brightened a little in agreement. "Feeling better. Here in town to see your daughter?"

"I plan to—I plan to before long. I also came to find out how you were and gam a bit about the ships and men we used to know."

"How am I? See for yourself. Maybe I can hold out until spring, maybe summer. But that's all. I'll never see another winter again, and don't know as I mind." He shook his head slowly with renewed wonder as he said, "A man really does get tired of living. Never thought it would happen, but it has, sure enough! Well, that's how *I* am. As for the ships we used to know, thirty-two of them are rotting in the ice someplace north of Alaska. Sometimes I close my eyes and see them, black and broken, pointing every which way; just froze in all that white ice and grey sky. Saddest sight I know. As for the men we used to know—well, they're pretty sorry wrecks

on the beach in San Francisco, waiting for passage home. Far as I can see, all I have is sad news for you, Captain. You got anything to tell me that's any better?"

"Nothing much, Mr. Martyn. Except that I want a ship. I hear the *Dorset* is fitting out."

"You? Why, you couldn't go back to sea. You're out of the habit of hard living. You've slept in a house through too many gales. You've eaten too much decent food. You'd die before you'd finish a three-year voyage."

"I'll suffocate in less than three years on land."

The old man's eyes smiled at him distantly. "You talk about dying like a young man, John."

"I still want a ship. I'll ship as mate. And I'll sail with the tide."

"There'll be no tide, John," he said slowly. "Neither for you nor for anyone else. Neither tonight, tomorrow, nor for the rest of the winter. The harbour's froze from Chappaquiddick to Katama, from the Vineyard to Falmouth. And I hear that New Bedford's froze clear across to Fairhaven. Seems as if there's solid ice from ninety north down to Montauk. You're not going anywhere, John—nowhere at all!"

The next morning John paid a brief visit to his daughter and then rode back across the plains, a lone figure in the winter afternoon. Not until then did he realize how little he had expected to return. It was as if he were returning to a cell from which he had been led only a moment ago with every hope of freedom.

Whatever had been thrusting him and Judith together was more relentless than he had ever thought. The protective magic had seemed only to be shielding them from discovery, but it was also determined not to let them part.

Chapter Nine

1

LIKE the wind and the surf, the murmur of human voices was one of the island sounds. The wind sometimes ceased, the Atlantic could be as still as the darkness between stars, but there was never any lull to the spoken flow of opinion, news, rumour, and observation. Back and forth across the island the voices surged and whispered, and every man and woman walked naked before his neighbours' eyes.

A dying man told his nurse what a caller had said on the night before; not that he was a gossip, but because he was reflecting aloud on the tragic inability of human beings to know when they were well off. Later in the morning, when the apothecary sighed over the evil days that had befallen the town's trade, the nurse repeated what her sick patient had told her; not that she was a gossip, but to prove that there would always be whaling as long as there was one brave man who wanted to go.

The apothecary told his wife, but she doubted the whole story. Once a man had been home and got a few proper meals in him, he wouldn't be fool enough to want to go back to sea. She asked the Edgartown Ladies Sewing Circle that afternoon to confirm her opinion. Another lady present returned home and told her husband he'd better get busy and cut as much ice from the pond as he could. A man who knew weather like John Gosnold was so sure the ice was going to break soon that he was already preparing to sail. The farmer walked down to the pond and discussed the matter with a

neighbour, who said that the way things looked the ice wouldn't melt until July. Come to think of it, though, he *had* noticed the lone rider going from the shire town up to West Tisbury.

"Looked all hunched up," he said. "Knew damn well something was queer."

Later he met a man over at Ashokomesset Cove, and once again there was the steady murmur of human voices,

So that even though John was the sole traveller that day on the county road and no one else made the same trip for days thereafter, he had not been home more than thirty-six hours when Deborah said to him with cold hurt in her voice: "John, why didn't you tell me why you went to Edgartown?"

"I did tell you."

"You didn't say anything about shipping out."

He was silent for a moment. "There wasn't anything to say," he told her hopelessly.

"John, John!" she cried. "What did I ever do to you? How did I ever hurt you?"

"You never hurt me," he said gently. "It's not you. I'll be all right after a bit. Just give me time, that's all."

And Saul Pengarth said: "But why didn't you get the old man to sign the affidavit then and there? He was *telling* you where the right of way went. By God, you had him ironed, and then you yourself pulled the iron out!"

"I didn't have any paper with me."

"But Edgartown has enough paper to sink the *Great Eastern*. You had a choice of five lawyers to make the forms right. Now there's the whole thing to do over again!"

"Then I'll do it over again," John said patiently.

"Like hell you will! What you'll do is forget again and try to ship out. Damned if I can understand *that*!"

"I'm not shipping out, Saul. I'll go back to George Henry

myself and clear up the mess I made. George Henry isn't going anywhere. Neither am I."

And Judith Pengarth said: "Is it true that you would have gone?"

"Yes."

"I half wish you had. God forgive me, but I wish you had!"

He smiled down at her as they stood for the moment of passing on the cold deserted highway. "Thank you, Judith," he said. "And for my part, I too wish that I were ten thousand miles away—or in hell—or any place, for that matter, as long as I was out of your life!"

"This must be the high tide of our love," she said bitterly. "Or is it hate?" Her anger became despair, and she told the deepest truth: "I'd die if you were to go away, John!"

"Yet it's the only way I can live. God, how I want to get you out of my mind! All day long I sound like a crazy man talking to myself, but I'm always talking to you. All day long I seem to be waiting for something, and what I'm waiting for is a chance like this to come across you for a minute or two. Yet I dread every meeting, because I never say anything kind or gentle. I hate it. My only chance is to get away and stay away, but I have a terrible feeling that, no matter what I do, I'll never get free of the wind that's pushing us together. I love you, Judith, but I wish to God that I'd never set eyes on you!"

He wanted to return to George Henry Pease and get the old man's statement as soon as possible, but the trip had to be postponed because the next ten days had been set aside for the issuing of the new trap-fishing leases.

For two hours every morning John sat in the Town Hall arguing with each applicant who came storming in with dissatisfaction. The iron stove glowed with a dully luminous belly, and the small room was steamy with the melted snow that slid to the floor from the men's clothing.

"When you go to Edgartown," said Deborah, "take the sleigh so I can go along and visit with Esther for a few days. I'm worried about the children with all this sickness going around."

"If you're taking your sleigh to Edgartown," said Zebulon Reade one morning in the Town Hall, "I'd like to go along—that is, if you got room."

"Plenty of room," said John, glancing up over a lease. "Plenty of room."

"Hear you're making up a party to go to Edgartown," Israel Norton rasped when John came into the store. Israel was not licensed to dispense spirits, but in a cold spell like this a man could always get a drink in the back room. Israel took drink for drink with every customer, because he was deathly afraid of the general sickness that was spreading over the island. "Got some stores waiting for me there, and my cart's no good in the snow. Got room for me?"

"Plenty of room," said John. "And no, thanks, Israel, I don't need a drink."

"That's where you're wrong," said Israel. "I always say that a man can get over being drunk in a couple of hours and be as good as ever, but it takes until Judgment Day to get over being dead, is my motto. If you think that's any joke, look at the way Dr. Archer passes up and down the road."

A cruel fever blew through the island houses on the icy draughts that never ceased whispering now. One house out of four had already been touched by it—an unsteady flickering of vitality that undulated for days until the patient shivered with delirium at 104 degrees. For some people the fever broke suddenly, leaving their exhausted eyes clear and relieved. For others the fever broke only with death. It made no difference whether one used the Indian herbs or the Dover's powders which Dr. Archer dispensed.

The old physician was on a perpetual patrol these days. At least two or three times a week he had been forced to ride up from Edgartown. Back and forth along the icy highway went his strong bay mare, Jenny, with the doctor joggling woodenly in the saddle, asleep with his own exhaustion. The doctor had only to set Jenny on the right road, and the mare was trained to keep going until the patient's wife, husband, or child darted out of the house to catch the bridle. The doctor would jerk himself awake, yawn, set aright his tall stovepipe hat, and then dismount, carrying a saddlebag in one hand and rubbing his back with the other.

On one of his trips he left word that Judith had better go see her father, who was also his patient.

Saul said to John, "When are you going?"

"Tomorrow, unless it comes on to snow too hard."

"Is there room for Judith?"

"Judith?" He looked at Saul on an impulse of quick alarm mixed with another emotion he was reluctant to define to himself. "I don't know, Saul. I've got Deborah, Zebulon, Israel Norton, and just a while back Donald Coffin asked to go."

"If you're taking your big sleigh, there'd still be room for one more. Three on a seat."

John thought for a moment. There was no way out.

"She can come," he said at last. "Be glad to have her."

On the morning of the ride to Edgartown, John and Deborah rose for an early start. The bedroom was icy. Through the thickly frosted windows John could not see the day until it finally dawned with the gloomy grey of an overcast sky. The bitter cold was all through the house, and Deborah made breakfast fully dressed in cloak and shawl. From outside they could hear the sleigh bells of the harness traces as Billy Bascom hitched up the two horses, but to John

the sound was merely a thin metallic tinkling without joy or promise of excitement.

Ever since he had returned from his fruitless visit to Judith's father he and Deborah had given up the last pretence of speaking to each other. Between them was the terrible speechlessness of a man and a woman who have pent up in them such torrents of passionate recrimination, counter-accusation, and despair that any unguarded remark could set off explosions too appalling to contemplate. Yet to John the heaviest burden of the day was not that he was going to have to face Deborah's silence, but that he was going to have to bear Judith's presence.

The only words Deborah spoke were to Billy Bascom as she stepped into the front seat of the sleigh.

"It feels just like that day of Jimmy Reade's wedding," she said. "The time we all got snowbound."

John climbed up beside her; he too noted the same high stillness in the air, the same biting cold, the same sense of withheld fury in the sky, growing more savage the longer it was contained. Two months ago the rolling moors had been green, brown, and grey. Now the island hills were undulating mounds of whiteness against which the still boulders and gaunt trees were starkly black. The ocean was black glass.

Shielded by a buffalo robe against the morning's bitterness, John and Deborah rode to Norton's store. The door opened at their approach and three men appeared, muffled into themselves. Israel Norton came toward the sleigh on unsteady feet. John saw at once that he was drunk.

"Now don't take on!" Israel growled before John could speak. His rasping voice slurred the words. "It's just that I'm dress' proper 'gainst the cold—inside and out. Yes sir, Cap'n, I'm fur-lined."

"What do you think John?" Zebulon Reade asked calmly.

"Does he go, or do Donald here and I pour him back into his bunk?"

"I'm all right!" Israel insisted with scorn. "Just because I'm drunk in the body don't mean I'm drunk in the head. Crystal-clear, my mind is. Right now I'm doing sums in four figures."

"Come aboard," John said coldly. He wanted as many people along as possible. Each additional person would be still another barrier between Judith and himself. "He'll fall asleep as soon as we get under way," he said to Zebulon. "By the time we get to Edgartown he'll be under full sail again."

"That's the truth!" Israel said, clumsily climbing into the rear seat. "Cap'n here understands a man with a weakness. Like the preacher says—he's got the divine forgiveness that comes from divine understanding that comes from sinful experience."

"Belay that!" said John sharply. "If you're coming, leave your gab behind. Donald, sit aft there with Israel. Zebulon, climb aboard along of me. Let's make some way now."

The ride to the Pengarth house was brisk and tense. The storekeeper's drunkenness had set everyone's nerves on edge. The steady jangle of the harness bells seemed muffled by the heavy quiet. As the cutter drew up in front of the Pengarth house, Saul alone came out to greet them. He was deeply disturbed by the day.

"Isn't Judith coming?" John asked.

"She'll be along," Saul looked up at the threatening sky. "Smells like snow."

"Been like this for days," John replied. "It'll hold off."

"Can't hold off much longer. Might be wiser to wait a while."

Judith came out of the house just then, walking briskly, apparently too busy refastening her shawl to be able to glance up at John. Saul watched her dubiously.

"Sure you want to go, Judith?"

"I've got to get to my father," she said to him, as if this were her last desperate answer in an argument that had been going on for hours. "I don't care how hard it snows!"

She got into the remaining seat, and Saul waved them away. John flicked the horses into a trot back to the highway, but they had gone no more than a hundred yards when Donald Coffin called out for John to halt.

"It's going to snow sure enough, John," he said. "Been feeling it more and more ever since we got started. Saul's right. It's going to come any minute."

"If you're that worried, don't go," John said impatiently. "If it snows, then it snows. If we have to turn back, we'll turn back; if we have to put in at someone's house along the way, we'll do that. But I'm starting out for Edgartown."

"Then start without me," said Donald Coffin. He put off the heavy fur robe and got out into the road. "My wife is ailing, and I'm not going to leave her alone to get snowed in."

"That's a damned good reason," John said sharply. The horses were now impatient to go, and the harness bells jangled to their nervous stamping. "Anyone else? How about you, Zebulon?"

"Oh, I'm going to Edgartown," Zebulon said mildly. "All the way. Sure you won't change your mind, Donald?"

"I'm sure," said the man in the road, and started off home. For a moment John gazed after him. In spite of his impatience, the sight of the retreating figure, black against the snow, filled him with an uneasy premonition. Judith, too, was looking backward. When she turned around, she met John's glance. Fear was in her eyes; he knew that it was not fear of the snow. The first of the safeguards between them had been removed. With her terror went a mute appeal: Either turn back or promise me that nothing will happen. But he couldn't turn

back, and he couldn't reassure her. Their glances held in silent desperation; then the tugging reins in his hands demanded his attention.

"Zebulon, go aft and change seats with Israel. I want him next to me where I can keep an eye on him."

When the switch had been made he flicked the horses into an abrupt trot, and the sleigh was away for the ten miles to Edgartown.

A flurry of light snow came and went, lasting no more than a few minutes, but the sky seemed to have pressed down a little closer.

"What do you think?" asked Zebulon. He sounded truly worried now.

"Could mean anything," said John. "We've been having spits on and off for days. Only thing to do is make more sail."

But the horses were already worked up to a good fast trot. To have urged them still further would have been foolhardy. The middle of the track was hard-packed, even icy in stretches, and the runners sang, the sleigh bells rang, and Israel Norton crooned to himself a foolish tune that was weird in its senselessness.

In West Tisbury village no other living creature moved on the road. The house windows glowed in the grey day with lamplight. Near the crest of Brandy Brow Hill, John urged everyone to sit tight because the horses would try to run free down the slope.

"Let's bivouac here, comrades," said Israel suddenly. "Does the captain want a scouting party of one to feel out the rum in the Traveller's Home? Aye, sir, I'm your man! Front and centre, Sergeant Norton reportin'!"

He stood upright, swaying in the sleigh while it careened past the inn and down the hill. Judith covered a scream and Deborah gasped "John!" when Israel almost fell out of the

sleigh, but John grabbed his coat. Holding the drunken man in with one hand and the reins with the other, he had no choice but to let the half-slipping animals run out their momentum down the slope. For an instant he wondered whether he would be risking an overturn if he tried to head the team on to the easterly fork at the foot of the hill, but the animals kept their footing and raced around the curve. The sleigh swayed and yawed, but the track itself forced them back into safety.

Halfway to Mill Pond Bridge, the horses stopped at last, and Israel plunged back into his seat like a sack of meal.

John methodically hitched the reins to the dash. Then he pulled up the drunken storekeeper by his lapels and shook the man with all the pent-up anger he had suppressed during the near crash. But there was still a deeper rage in John, and the release of one fury unleashed the other, so that both angers merged and locked John and his victim in its grip. He could neither stop shaking the man nor control his spoken wrath.

"You drunken lunatic! You filthy swab! Don't you have the sense to take care of yourself? Do you have to smash everyone's life along with your own? You fool, you stupid, helpless bastard, you ought to be kicked from one end of the island to the other——"

There was relief in the outburst, but the words of the tirade were familiar—for this was what John had been shouting at himself for having given in to his desire for Judith in the first place, for having deliberately ruined his own happiness with Deborah, for having been such a stubborn fool as to persist in making the trip when even a child could tell that a blinding storm was making up from minute to minute. Now he knew that the true reason for his insistence—no matter how he had denied it before—was simply that Judith would be coming along. With all the savage contempt he felt for himself, he

hurled Israel away, flinging him back into the seat with such violence that the sleigh quivered.

"Come now, John," said Zebulon. "Israel's a nuisance, but he doesn't draw that much water."

"I know," said John. "It wasn't Israel I was shaking. Maybe he'll sleep now."

They rode quietly through West Tisbury village and for a quarter of a mile beyond, out into the heavy silence of the low, sparsely wooded flats. There the horses resumed their smart trot.

Zebulon tapped John on the shoulder and pointed northward to their left where the grey clarity of the sky had dissolved into a blackish murk.

"Snowing, all right," John said. "I saw it a little while ago. If it comes on to blow from any quarter but north, we won't get it."

Suddenly Israel Norton, who had been sitting in a semi-stupor, stood bolt upright and said: "Nobody can talk to me like that! I fought for the Union; by God, I'm a free man! I'm a——"

He pitched forward like a log and fell over the dashboard directly across the path of the left runner. The crack of breaking bone was louder than the beat of hoofs, and Israel began to scream like a calliope—going on and on. By the time John halted the sleigh and ran back to where the fallen man lay, the snow all about Israel's leg was red with blood. His screaming was so unnerving that the faces of the two women reflected every spasm of his agony. Together they stooped to help him, but John took command.

"Don't move him," he said at once. "You'll only tear his leg more." He knelt down in the snow and spoke over his shoulder. "Zebulon, take out the seat of the sleigh. We'll lash his leg to it just as it is. When we carry him, there'll be

nothing to dangle. Israel!" he said sharply. "Israel, stop that squawking at once, or I'll smash you! You were a soldier. I've seen too many men chewed by whales and broken by falls from rigging to know that pain can be borne. Hear, now!" He shook the man's chin sharply, and the terrible sound came to a sobbing end. After an instant Israel's eyes cleared, and he looked up at John wonderingly, as if just awakening from a nightmare.

"I hurt, John," he said simply. "Oh God, I hurt!"

"Listen, Israel, you were dead-drunk, fell out of the sleigh and got run over. Your leg is broken."

"I hurt, John," said Israel in exactly the same tone.

"I know, but you'll be in fine shape soon. Where's your rum?"

"Rum?" Israel asked stupidly. He couldn't take his gaze from John's face, as if John alone stood between him and a threatening cloud of pain.

"If you ever wanted to get dead-drunk, now's the time." He ran his hands through the man's clothes, feeling for a bottle, which he found in an inside pocket.

"It's half full," John said. "Drink it down. All of it. Lively, now. All in one gulp! Judith, bend down and hold his head so he doesn't choke on it."

"Can't we do something about the bleeding?" Deborah asked.

"No artery has been broken," John said. "We'll bandage him soon as we get the bones lashed into place, or near enough into place. Now, don't worry, Deborah," he said sharply. "I've doctored lots of men in my time, and nobody ever died on me because of a broken leg. Zeb!" he raised his voice into a quarter-deck shout. "Look lively with that seat plank!"

"Coming!"

"Deborah, there's some half-inch line under the dash. Fetch it."

Within a few minutes John had placed the broken leg out straight on the plank and roughly set the bone as well as he could by feel, double-lashing it from ankle to thigh to the makeshift splint.

"The nearest house down the road is Emma Wilkinson's," said Zebulon. "Unless you want to carry him to Edgartown."

"You can't move him that far!" Deborah said. "I don't care how many men's bones you've set, John; there were broken bones here on the island while you were away. Israel oughtn't to be moved. Take him to Emma's and I'll stay with him while you go for Dr. Archer."

Deborah was right, for every movement, even after he had been carried to the sleigh, made Israel groan with pain. A hundred yards down the road was the Wilkinson cottage, but Emma did not come out to greet them. John went into the house and found the old woman in bed.

"She's got the fever," he said when he returned, "and the place is stone-cold."

"Then the doctor will be doing twice as much good when he gets here!" Deborah said. "Take Israel inside, and I'll make a fire."

"She's out of wood."

"Zebulon will stay and cut us some. If you hurry you can get to Edgartown and back in a little over two hours."

John listened to his wife's orders with an impassive face, hiding his dread that the rest of the ride would fulfil the premonition which had haunted him all along.

He and Judith went out into the greyness of the ominous day, climbed into the front seat of the sleigh, and covered themselves with the great robe. They were both careful not to touch each other—not even their garments brushed

together. Yet never before, even at the height of the most intimate fulfilment, was he so aware of her. The sleigh started. No word was spoken. They faced forward woodenly, each sitting at one end of the seat, and swayed in unison to the ruts and bumps beneath the track.

Up and down along the rolling moraine went the sleigh, across land that had been tormented millions of years before into folds and waves by ponderous antediluvian ice. Green brush and woodlands covered the moraine in summertime, but now that the world was white with snow again, the sleigh was moving back into the time before any life existed—where only John and Judith were alive to know what it was like to be softly human. In this white loneliness, it made no difference whether they were the first to be born or the last to survive the destruction of their race.

At last snow fell out of the stillness of the sky. Within five minutes the fall had become so heavy that the horses' heads could barely be seen. Only the steep walls of snow on either side of the track kept the animals going in the right direction.

"We'll be all right," John said. "Don't worry."

"I'm not afraid," said Judith.

In the dead silence of the snowfall there was no reminder about them of the real world of people in which they lived—no reminder that there was a time past or a time to come; and yet they continued to sit apart, fighting with more desperation than ever before against the increasing temptation that was being pressed on them. There was not an eye that would see them, not an ear to overhear the passionate words that fought to come after all the weeks of fierce restraint.

Then, as if in impatience with them for their continuing resistance, the sleigh passed over a stretch so rough that even though they clung to the seat they were violently thrown together.

She started to apologize and he started to say that it was no matter, but no words were said because it was too late—because they were kissing each other's eyes, cheeks, and lips, murmuring their love, and then in another moment they lay between the two buffalo robes on the floor of the sleigh, while the driverless horses plodded docilely along the track into the whirling, silent snow.

For a while afterward they still clung to each other, then she turned her head away in a despairing weariness with herself, with John, with what life was doing to them.

"I knew it would happen!" she murmured. "All along I knew it would happen. I couldn't bear it and I couldn't stop it. I love you, John, but now I'm deathly afraid of what's pushing us together. In the beginning it seemed as if all sorts of little things were being done to arrange for us to be alone. It was a sweet magic—a white magic. But now for the first time someone had to be hurt—painfully hurt—just so we could have these few moments together like this—like animals in a pen. No," she said with vehemence. "If there really is something determined to push us together, it's nothing gentle, nothing playful, nothing lovely. It is without pity—neither for us nor for anyone else. It's something that will hurt people. Israel is only the first to be crushed. What is on us, John, is evil, brutal, and in the end it will kill—perhaps it will kill us. I half hope it does!"

Chapter Ten

1

SAUL PENGARTH stood in the doorway of his house and watched his wife drive away in the crowded sleigh. Down the hollow, up the rise, black against the snow, went the jingling party; and then out of sight behind the drift-covered dome of the hill that hid the South Road from his view. He stood there even after they were out of sight, and the sound of the sleigh bells had become distant and lost in the surrounding silence.

He stood there waiting, just as he had waited for so many years: as if from over a distant hill, or out of the lowering sky, or from around the house behind him, something portentous was on the way that would finally gladden his heart the moment he saw it. He didn't know what it was or what shape it would take; he knew only that whatever happiness was to be his lot in this life was still on the far side of what was yet to come. He was tight with all the years of waiting, bone- and heart-weary of it, and yet he could no more give up the forlorn hope of happiness on the way than he could give up breathing. It was tantalizingly just out of sight, but it was coming, *must* be coming—— Oh God, he thought wearily, I've waited so long, let it come! I don't know what it is, but God, God, God, let it come!

He sighed his desperate prayer and closed his eyes; but the hills, rocks, and sky of the island were unchanged on his inner lids, as if this one scene would remain with him the rest of his life. Then, magically, in the distance of the vision, there

appeared a small black figure against the distant snow—a figure that seemed to be hurrying toward him, struggling through the deep snow, a woman with her arms outstretched to him, and it was Judith, her face poignant with pleading as she called out, “Saul—Saul, how I love you! I’ve come back. Oh, Saul dearest, I love you so!”

He opened his eyes, half hoping that they had never really been closed. The landscape was the same, but no figure moved. What he had seen behind his eyes had been only his deepest dream.

He went back into the house, and his face was gravely sad. He was so used to his secret anger that its absence frightened him, as if his strength had suddenly given out, and there he stood, nerveless, shaking, unprotected. He built up the fire to put heart into the empty house—but the emptiness could not be reached because Judith was going to be away for days, possibly weeks. Always before, he had been the one to leave the house—to be gone for years. Never until now had he been the one to be left behind.

Slowly the sense of waiting returned, but now he was waiting to get accustomed to Judith’s absence. Within an hour, perhaps, he thought, he would suddenly find that he was no longer thinking of her, and look back at these first few moments only to laugh at himself. The minutes passed endlessly, and every room, wherever he went, was filled with her ghosts. This was the way Judith must have felt long ago when he would leave, he thought. This was the loneliness Judith must have suffered when she was in love with him. There must have been a time when she had felt that way, he told himself. She would never have married him otherwise. But where was her love now?

He lit a cigar and paced back and forth before the stove’s heat.

If he himself had driven Judith to Edgartown, at this moment he would be talking to her. And why hadn't he offered to drive her? Instead, like a fool, he had spent the morning arguing with her, telling her not to go, talking about the weather, and not once saying he would miss her. He had wanted her to ask him to drive her.

He saw himself arguing with her as they sat side by side in the light Henderson racing sleigh—as they should properly be riding if he weren't such a damn fool.

"But I *did* ask you," she would be saying. "I did ask you, Saul."

"I know you did, but you said you wanted me to take you because you didn't want to go with John and Deborah Gosnold."

"Well?"

"Well, that's the whole thing. You didn't say that it was *me* you wanted to go with! It was only that you didn't want to go with *them*. You asked me to drive you, but you didn't ask me the way I wanted to hear it."

"Any more than when you asked me not to go, you didn't say that you would miss *me*."

"I guess it's because it's been so long since either of us had anything soft to say to the other. It's my fault, Judith," he would say to her. "It's all my fault."

She would listen to him in silence and then lean against him shyly the way she used to do years ago. He loved her then. He loved her now. He had never stopped.

He was damping down the fires, fixing the flues.

"Where are you going, man?" he asked himself. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to Edgartown after my wife, you damned fool! I'm going to hitch up the sleigh and catch up with her, and

for once in my life do something to please her. I'm going after my wife, Captain, because I love her!"

The wintry look in his eyes had softened, and there was finally a presentiment of happiness in his heart as he pulled the light sleigh out into the snow and snapped the traces on the two mares. The horses were in fine shape and eager to run in the cold day. With the little sleigh they ought to sail along clipper-style and catch the Gosnolds well this side of Edgartown. He tossed aboard a carpetbag filled with enough clothes for at least a week's stay with Judith at her father's.

The hickory sleigh yielded to his weight as he got in behind the rakishly curved dash and cracked his whip with a flourish. The sleigh raced away, singing over the dry snow. For a while he spoke to his horses with a gamy mixture of insult and encouragement, as if they were a boat crew racing toward a cruising whale.

"Come on you bullies, lay into it there! Faster, faster, faster! Twitch those rumps, you pretty bastards! Find your muscles, you're not all fat. Pick 'em up, pick 'em up, pick 'em up. Oh, you sweet girls, lay into it now!"

The matched pacers sped over the snow, and he felt that they knew what was in his mind, how taut was his eagerness to start a new life with Judith; and because they were his horses and loved him without question, they would strain every nerve to get him what he wanted. What he wanted was for Judith to hear that he was a changed man; that he understood her at last; that from this point on life for them would be sweeter than ever before. All these years he had been waiting, but he saw now that he had been waiting only for himself to realize that he had marched into her life, and there he had stood squarely in the centre, his arms folded, his head aloof—regally prepared to accept her adulation, but

never once had he offered her any tenderness in return. It was all very clear now.

"My God, Judith, it's all so plain," he heard himself saying to her, returning to the conversation they would very soon be having. "I was treating you the way a man is supposed to treat a woman, but on the other hand, I picked you in the first place because you *weren't* just an ordinary woman. It's an old trick in me. I picked the biggest and best men as first mates, then treated them as if they were dirt. I drove them, cursed them, even fought them. And all I was doing was making myself out to be the biggest man. I never said that aloud in my life to anyone before. I ran you down just the way I ran down those men. I was a fool, Judith. I care more about you than I did about any vessel or even any pride I have. Be my wife again, give me another chance. Somewhere in you there still must be love for me. Let's find it, Judith. Let me make it up to you."

And Judith would say, "I gave up hope so long ago of hearing you talk that way to me that it's almost like looking back at an old dream and wondering if I still want it to come true."

"Want it to come true," he would plead. "My God, Judith, we've wasted too many years!"

For a little while they would ride in silence through the cold day and then, without turning her head, she would say in a low voice, "I guess that a part of me still wants it to come true, Saul."

And he would free an arm for a moment to draw her to him, and they would ride that way—tenderly. Under the robe their mittened hands would clasp. Between them would be the same flow of feeling that there used to be twelve years ago. They would be so lost to their present, so aware only of each other, that neither would notice the steady fall of snow. . . .

Snow fell in the reverie, because snow was beginning to fall on his face as the sleigh raced smartly down Brandy Brow Hill in West Tisbury. He crossed the Mill Pond Bridge and drew rein abruptly in front of the store on the "king's land" at the corner of the County Road junction.

In the rear of the store two lamps gave a pale golden glow to the darkness. The group of men around the stove looked up at his hurried entrance, but he had caught them in the act of preparing to leave.

"Going or coming, Cap'n?" he was asked, and he laughed.

"John Gosnold and a sleigh pass here a while back?" he asked.

The men stared at him, and not until weeks later did Saul realize how oddly expressionless were their faces.

"About an hour or so," was the answer, very cautiously, when he came to look back at this moment and every other moment of his life with Judith, seeing them all through the sadness in his heart and the agony of shame in his throat. "Going like hell, too. Making a fast passage to Edgartown, looked like."

As he turned to hurry out of the store, another man made the one remark that seemed odd the very moment Saul heard it.

"But there were a lot of other folks along, Captain. Deborah Gosnold was with them too. Saw her clear as day."

Saul hesitated and almost swung around, frowning and laughing at the same time at the idiocy of the statement; there was no time to waste, though, not another second to lose after so many years of lovelessness and misunderstanding. When he got back into the sleigh, the snow was coming down heavily — one thick white diaphanous curtain

immediately behind another in an infinite succession, until the few houses by the road could not be seen, until there was no sky, and the track led off into white nothingness ten yards away. But Saul didn't care—he was a happy man, gloriously free of all the darkness in himself—and the tenderest time of his life seemed to lay not more than an hour or two away straight ahead in the snow. He cracked his whip about the ears of his horses, now swinging along in perfect rhythm.

“Lay into it, there!” he called. His voice was a soft croon. “Break your backs for me, you sweethearts. Pick ’em up, pick ’em up, oh, pick ’em up!”

The silent snow was so thick, so dizzying, that he had no idea of distances. The trees on either side of the road were almost invisible; the very road itself had lost all its contour. All he could tell was that sometimes he was speeding up a gentle slope and sometimes down. The road was so straight, there were neither bends nor curves to use as landmarks.

The frozen bloodstain was on the left side of the road: a big pink patch on the snow that floated into view and disappeared before he could stop the horses. He reined in so hard, the animals skidded and slid, but he was out of the sleigh and running back along the track without bothering to secure the reins. In a moment he came upon the bloodstain again. From the amount of undyed snow that lay powdered over the frozen clot, he could tell that the accident had happened within the past hour.

Panic gripped Saul's stomach and he could barely breathe as he glanced around for some sign that would show him who in Gosnold's sleigh had been hurt. He saw a maze of footprints, but he could not tell whether there had been two women or only one walking around. The main path of tracks led away from the road where the big sleigh had halted. He followed them through the dense white silence of the blizzard until he

came to a doorway. He could barely make out the rest of the house, but from its size and approximate bearing he guessed that he was at Emma Wilkinson's.

Zebulon Reade opened the door.

"What happened?" Saul demanded, grasping his arm. "Whose blood was that?"

"Israel Norton's. He's by the fire. Come aboard."

"Where's Judith? Is she all right?"

"She's on the way to Edgartown."

"That you, Saul?" It was Deborah's voice.

Saul slowly entered the small low room. The storekeeper lay moaning on the floor, his face of pain half a black shadow, the other half a satanic red by reflection of the newly laid fire. Through a door came a woman's groaning.

"That's Emma," Zebulon said. "She's got the pneumonia. Deborah's taking care of her. Israel got taken drunk and fell under one of John's runners. Dead-drunk is the only thing that's keeping him from going out of his mind with the pain right now."

"Then I'm leaving," Saul said. "There's nothing I can do for you here."

"Don't go," Deborah said. "I never saw such heavy snow. If it weren't that we needed Dr. Archer so bad, I wouldn't have let John go on."

"I must," Saul insisted. "I must!" Unless he were racing closer to his wife all the time, he'd die of impatience.

"Don't be a damn fool!" Zebulon said. "By now Judith's most to Edgartown. You'd founder in no time, the way it's going."

They pressed him to wait until the snowfall stopped, or at least lightened. Reade helped him lead back the horses and sleigh to the old barn. When he returned to the warmth of the house, his high spirits made Deborah remark:

"Well, I suppose there's nothing like the sight of a man with a broken leg and the groan of a sick woman to cheer a body up!"

He laughed softly. "Deborah, you're one of the two finest women on this island!"

"About time you began to appreciate me."

"About time I began to appreciate Judith too."

"Oh?"

"I've been a fool, Deborah," he confided to her. "A first-class, full-rigged, copper-bottomed, iron-fastened fool. I don't know how much she's told you—women talk to each other about these things in a way men don't. All I can say is that she's a fine woman, and it's time I acted as if I knew it!"

Deborah was silent for a long time, looking into the fire; then she said without turning, "With all those good intentions in your heart, you might make a good start by going out to get some more wood."

He smiled and began to dress. The impatience to be with Judith that had burned him for so many hours was stronger than ever; but he refused to acknowledge that it had become a tormenting presentiment that, by not pushing on against the snow, he had made the greatest mistake of his life.

Chapter Eleven

1

BY the middle of the afternoon the steadily falling snow had become a white suffocation that promised to continue beyond bearing.

In Edgartown, John left Judith at her father's door, helping her down from the sleigh. They both moved with the dazed composure of dolls on a music box. She took her small trunk from him, and he touched his hat. Quietly they said "Good-bye" to each other. He watched her pick her way through the snow in the lane, raise her skirts to mount the steps, and then touch the knocker. Her pale, cameo-like face was in profile against the dark door, and through his dazed calm he loved every movement she made. She seemed more deeply his than he had ever dreamed any woman could be.

His horses moved away just as she entered the house, and only after she was gone did he realize how her foreboding words in the sleigh had made him share her sense of dark things to come.

The mood was still on him when he entered Dr. Archer's house and explained to the physician why he was needed. John promised to return the doctor to town as soon as Israel's leg was set, and the doctor got ready at once. On the silent road out of town John sank more broodingly into himself than ever before.

The thick still air was almost mild, and soundless. No bird flew through the falling snow; no bough, bush, or animal moved. All about the riders was a white, oppressive murk.

"If I didn't know that there's always been an end to every snowfall," said the doctor, "I'd swear that this was the one that would go on forever. Can't say that I'd mind, either. Then maybe I'd get some rest. I'm tired clean down to my bones."

"Israel's in great pain," John replied.

"He must be, sure enough. Anyway, he's lucky—a broken bone can be set and it mends. Trouble is when things you can't touch get broken. Then you can only sit there, look wise, and watch the patient fight it out. Nothing you can do."

"No," said John. "I've seen it at sea—watching men sicken and die."

"Sometimes, though," continued the doctor, "the best thing you can do is sit and listen to a man tell his troubles. Better than most medicines that come in bottles—a man getting a load off his mind. Like heaving down a vessel to scrape the barnacles off the hull. I suppose you can always tell just by looking at a ship under sail that she's carrying a load of weed hidden below the water line."

"You can always tell with a ship."

"And I can always tell with a man."

Slowly John turned his head, alarmed at the quiet challenge; but the doctor was staring straight ahead, his brows, lashes, and beard flaked with snow. Then John's apprehension disappeared, for the doctor's implied promise of sympathy had suddenly disarmed him. Clouds of words clotted his throat. Forty years of withheld tears threatened to flood forth from all the locked recesses where old agonies were compressed to stone.

Yet as he groped for the words to make a coherent story, the hopelessness of ever making himself understood held him mute. He did not see how he could tell his feelings without making himself a man to be despised. Nor could he

explain that, even while he knew he was inflicting unforgivable pain on those closest to him, he was also filled with an inner sense of happiness, of self-forgiveness, because he could not have done things differently.

Then John decided that only his own conscience had given the doctor's chance remark its personal meaning. If Archer were truly inviting a confidence, he would have been far more definite. Instead, he remained silent.

"You must hear a lot of strange things," John said.

"Not strange to me," said the doctor, as if the long pause had been a natural part of the conversation. "Most folks do or feel pretty much the same thing, even though each man thinks he's different. Broken legs don't differ much, one from the other. Same with broken hopes."

There was no use in talking further, John told himself wearily. There was no one who could help him. What was done, was done. The consequences were on their way, and they were his to bear.

Yet the temptation to talk was a lure—and if the falling snow made a privacy for love, it was also a refuge for confession. "When we get up to that mound, I'll tell him," John promised himself. The sleigh bumped and slid forward, drew almost up to the mound, but the words wouldn't come. "When we get to that tree five yards off." The tree, too, passed, and John still said nothing. There was no point in starting if he couldn't finish, and soon they'd be at Emma Wilkinson's. It was too late; the time was gone. And all for the best, he reflected.

Through the screen of falling snow, the cottage came into view before he expected it. When he told the doctor where they were, there was no answer. John turned. Dr. Archer had been asleep for so long that his hat and most of his face were

entirely covered by snow. He hadn't even bothered to shake off the clotted flakes that had buried him. Why, he couldn't have been meaning me at all, John thought.

2

Before John reached the cottage door, it was opened for him, and a blaze of alarm seared his heart when he recognized Saul standing there.

"How's Judith?" were Saul's first words. He made it a demand.

John stood aside to allow the doctor to pass into the house, postponing his reply until he could be sure his voice would be steady.

"She's at her father's," John said. "She's all right."

"But is she angry?" Saul insisted. "Did she let fall anything to make you think that?"

"Angry about what?" John asked slowly.

"Because I didn't take her over myself. Because, with her father dying, I didn't hitch up my own rig. After all, I'm her husband."

"She said nothing about that."

"Didn't she even seem angry?"

"No, Saul, nothing was said."

Saul sighed his relief. "I'm a fool," he said heavily to John. "A damned fool for the way I've treated that woman." John's face was expressionless as he seemed to watch the physician bend over the groaning man. "If I hadn't seen the signs of a crack-up, I would have caught you before you reached Edgartown," Saul went on. "I shouldn't have stopped, I know I shouldn't have. If I had caught up with you, I could have taken her aboard my own sleigh, where she

belonged. She wouldn't be feeling the way she does, and I wouldn't be feeling the way I do."

John thought of Saul coming upon them as they were. The blood drained from his head, but his face never changed.

"I told you, Saul," he said, "Judith said nothing."

"She doesn't have to say anything. I know what's in her mind. You can't live with a woman twelve years and not know. It's knowing and doing nothing about it that shows you're a fool. It would have been so easy for me to give her what she needed to make her happy. Well, I'll make it all up to her. All and more!"

"I want you two men to lend a hand," the doctor called. "We've got to stretch his leg and get the bone to set proper. Zeb, you and Saul hold his shoulders and John'll pull at the foot. That'll stretch the muscles that are grabbing the wrong way. Everybody just hold on until I get her all lined up. Israel, you can holler all you want, but if you keep your mind on not hollering, it'll give you something to think about. Ready now, heave, all!"

Within a few minutes the men rose panting from the heavy exertion, and Israel lay sobbing with exhaustion, but the thigh was set. The doctor gave him laudanum. "That'll quiet him. Split me some of those logs for splints while I go in and see the old woman."

The physician went into the other room, where Deborah was sitting by Emma's bedside.

As Saul cut and trimmed the wood, John could see the small smile on his friend's face, and in that smile were all of Saul's thoughts about Judith—how he would be with her that coming night, the following morning, the next day, and the rest of their lives. Not once did it occur to him, John saw, that his wife did not love him. Nor that she could be in love with anyone else.

The firelight gleamed in Saul's eyes as he whittled away with his heavy sailor's knife; his face was strong even in tenderness, yet John could not subdue the contempt one feels for a man who loves a woman and is unloved in return. Why must he cling so tenaciously to someone who was determined to evade him? Why must he sit there smiling like a clown squatting on a basket of paper, while the entire audience of laughing fair-goers see the flames that will send him leaping into the air in just another moment?

For the love of God, John shouted silently, wake up, you fool! You're not the one who's loved! Where's your pride? How do you think you sound, asking after her so solicitously—when all the time she was with me? How am I to take you seriously?

Yet as John raged within himself at the sight of Saul's dreaming face, he knew that under his contempt was the fear that in this new mood of tenderness, with his new determination, Saul might possibly reclaim his wife. After all, she had no tie to John besides desire. If she could possibly escape from it, she would fly down any road that was open to her. She didn't need a ship to take her anywhere—all she needed was a man like Saul, prepared to be kind and sympathetic.

John covertly examined Saul's smile again—was it based on some better knowledge of his wife than John had? There must be so much between them to which John was alien—even her expressed hatred of Saul must be based on intimacies John still knew nothing about. John was afraid of Saul—afraid of the coming night in her father's house, afraid of all the time Saul would have to reveal his new self to her. Because if Judith could be unfaithful to her husband with her lover, how much more easily could she be unfaithful to her lover with her husband.

"I'm ready to go," said the physician. To Deborah he continued, "If you really can stay with her, it would be a mercy. She's got pneumonia for fair."

"I'll stay," Deborah replied. "It's the least I can do."

"What about Esther?" John asked her.

"Esther's hale and hearty. I was going only for a visit anyhow. Emma's liable to die, the doctor says. Certainly a day or two won't make any difference to Esther. And as for your business, John——"

"I can take care of that," Saul broke in. "I'm going to be in Edgartown. No reason why I can't get the old man's deposition as well as John. And I'll carry you in, Doctor. I was just waiting for you to finish up on Israel with these splints. I can take you too, Zeb."

"Then I'll stay with Deborah," John said.

"You can't stay, John," his wife replied. There was neither welcome nor regret in her voice. "There's no place for you to sleep except on the floor. You go on home and come back for me day after tomorrow."

John looked at the men across the room.

Saul was going off to Judith as if triumph waited only for his reaching out his hand to her. In their youth, whenever Saul had determined to get a woman, he had never failed. This new Saul—the man of tenderness intent on bestowing that tenderness on Judith—had become the young Saul again, and he was going to Judith at a time when she needed help most, when she would be most grateful for understanding, when she would be most willing to forget old hurts, old angers, and old hates.

And there was nothing John could do, nothing he could say, that could stop what was going to happen between the

husband and the wife. He could only stand there and speak calmly in his imprisoned voice.

"What about Israel, Doctor?" he said. "Does he lay over, or can he be taken home?"

"Well, Deborah is going to have her hands full with the old woman, and Israel is going to need a lot of nursing. As long as he's asleep and feeling no pain, you might as well get him home. We'll all lend you a hand, and if you cover him up good with a robe, he'll be comfortable."

John looked at his wife. "Is that all right with you, Deborah?" he asked.

"It doesn't make a particle of difference to me when you go, or whether you stay or go." Her eyes and voice were hard. "Let's do what's best for Israel."

The men picked up the unconscious storekeeper and carried him out to the heavy sleigh, covering him with the same robe John and Judith had thrown over themselves only a few hours ago. The broken man lay exactly where the lovers had lain, as if in ironical proof that Judith had spoken the truth—that Israel's agony was the opportunity for their love.

John waited until Saul's light cutter and his two passengers had disappeared through the falling snow on the way to Edgartown. Then he went back inside the cottage, but all he could say was, "Is there anything you want me to bring back for you?"

"No," she said shortly.

"Some food, some clothes?"

"No," she said. "There's nothing you can do. Nothing."

And she had spoken such a deep truth that there was no reply for him to make. He went out into the snow and drove away. The silent whiteness devoured him almost immediately.

Chapter Twelve

1

WHEN Deborah herself was confined to bed, her grey-streaked hair was fixed in two braids, just as when she had been a little girl. She lay very still; her face, as she slept, was pale and her breathing was laboured. She had so exhausted herself nursing the old woman that within a week she had become an easy prey for the contagion.

She had been home for three days now. John tended her with such single-mindedness that there was no time to brood about Judith and Saul together in Edgartown. He couldn't bear to think about them. Deliberately he refused the proffered help of his neighbours. He bound himself to Deborah with duty, so that he would, in spite of himself, be changed back into the man he used to be—so devoted to his wife that no other woman could possibly exist in his mind.

Deborah opened her eyes, and for a moment her face was without lines, without trouble—the face of a young girl whose hair was poignantly touched with snow.

“Deborah,” he said softly, “how are you feeling?”

Her head didn't move, nor would her eyes turn to him; but in the instant of hearing his voice, the lines of her mouth slowly tightened, her whole face changed and aged.

“I'm all right. I guess,” she said. “There's nothing for you to do.”

“You keep saying that, Deborah,” he said. “You keep saying that as if it meant more things than you could get into words.”

"Maybe it does," she said. "All I can say is what comes to my mind." She was silent for a moment. "If you write to Esther, don't tell her I'm ailing. She'll only come running, and she's got enough trouble as it is."

"I didn't write."

"No, I didn't think you did," she said bitterly. "You keep acting as if the children had cut *you* off. I'm more than half thinking it was the other way around."

"That's not true, Deborah."

"Maybe not. Maybe I've reached the point where I don't know what's true about you any more and what isn't."

He sat down on the edge of the bed. She kept her hands beneath the covers, and he didn't dare reach for them.

"Deborah," he said, "listen to me. Will you listen?"

A faint smile of irony touched her lips. "I'm not deaf," she said. "I'm not deaf, and I'm certainly not blind."

"I want things to be good for you," he said. "More than anything in the world I want you to be happy, to be well again; and more than anything in the world I want to be the man who makes you happy and well."

She said nothing. She stared at the ceiling, her eyes still hard, her lips still a tight line. Then suddenly the lips quivered, her eyes filled with tears, and she tried to speak.

"You used to be that man, John," she said. Her tortured voice was quiet. "You really were that man for a long, long time."

"And not now?"

She shook her head. "No. Not now, and you know it."

"But I don't want it to be that way, Deborah. God help me, I don't."

Under the covers her shoulders shrugged.

"If you don't, then do something about it."

"I am doing it, Deborah. I'm with you, I want to be with you. Isn't that enough?"

"No," she said. "Somehow it isn't."

"Well, what do you want?" he pleaded. "Just tell me, and I'll do it."

"I don't know," she replied. "There isn't any one thing you can do or say. It's as if I've lost something and I don't know how to name it or where it's gone. Whatever it is, though, it's lost; and I can't help feeling that you were the one who lost it for me. That's the way I feel about you, John—as if you had taken the one thing I treasured most, the one thing I counted as the most important part of my life, and you just let it slip through your fingers because you didn't care enough. Maybe I'm just not a forgiving person, John!" Her voice suddenly broke with passion. "But how I hate you for what you threw away!"

He didn't move. He didn't look away. In no way did he try to escape her agony. Throughout him was a heavy sadness, and that was all: pity, tenderness, but no love. He was sure that he could find in himself all the love he longed to feel for her if only he could say and sincerely mean that he was through with Judith forever. The words would be easy; meaning them, though, was beyond his control. He refused to mock Deborah by telling her the easy lie, but he also refused to stop trying to fight his way to her.

"Deborah, what's lost can always be found. I remember you saying that to Esther when she was a little girl, crying. You said: 'Let's go out and look together.' And you did find it. If you search hard enough, you'll always find it."

"That's true." Then she added: "Providing no one has come along in the meantime and picked it up."

He took the blow without flinching, so he thought; but nevertheless he found himself telling the lie.

"Nobody's picked it up, Deborah," he said. "It's still there, and you and I will find whatever seems to be lost. Believe me, we will."

As he spoke, the lie became no lie. He meant every word he said. A surge of soft love for her rose in him like new blood, and he was happy.

"Let me get you something, Deborah." He stood up and he was smiling. "Make it something in the furthest place in the house, and I'll get it for you."

"Oh, John!" She was laughing at him and crying. "That's a small boy's trick! I'm not asking you to fetch and carry."

"No," he said. "But as long as we're talking about girls losing things, what's wrong with boys running errands to prove they're good?"

"Maybe I'd like some soup. That's no great errand to run, but I think I'm hungry."

He was in the kitchen filling a bowl from the iron pot, still smiling to himself, when some visitors arrived: Mrs. Coffin, Mrs. Cleaveland, and Mrs. Barker.

They were all dressed in black, yet there was a rosiness about them, as if they had enjoyed a spell of the open air that was now mild again. They removed their overshoes and came in with a burst of chatter. They asked about Deborah; they said a man shouldn't have to go carrying soup to his wife, and what a shame they hadn't come before.

"You've just come from the burying ground," he said sharply. "Who was it died this time?"

"Caroline Cooper. She took sick again only three days ago and went just like that. Like most folks, she died of the relapse. That brings it up to ten for this town alone. How's Deborah doing?"

"She doing fine. Her fever's still holding, but as long as it doesn't get worse, I'm not worried. And once Deborah gets

better, she's not going to have any relapse. I'll see to that, all right. Don't stay too long."

He did not go up with the gossiping women because he was angry with them. They had intruded just when he and Deborah had reached one of those moments of understanding when all the years of a marriage pile up into a single wave of warmth that can sweep two hurt people over the most jagged reef.

Finally the women were gone. As soon as he closed the door after them, he went up to Deborah.

"You'd think they'd change their clothes before visiting around," he said. "Those damned women have no more sense of fitness than a shark."

"I didn't see anything wrong with the way they came," said Deborah. "There's been so much dying, people are getting used to it. It was like that last time we had a winter like this."

"I remember your letter about it. My God," he said, "you don't know how good it was to get letters from home! I used to read mine over and over, the same letter for months. Every time I'd take that piece of paper out of my pocket, I'd feel close to you."

"It was like that here. Waiting is the same, wherever you do it. Nobody ever really gets used to it. Not until you stop caring."

"We lost so many years, Deborah. We never had a chance to get to know each other."

"I never thought of us as strangers," she said. "You were away far more than you were home, but I always felt that I knew you."

"What we really knew were the pieces of paper we used to send each other. Get better soon, Deborah," he begged. "We'll have all the good times we ever planned to have. We'll

just talk each other's heads off and make up for the years we were five thousand miles apart. Hold my hand," he said, smiling down at her. "Hold my hand while we talk."

Slowly she drew her hot, dry hand from under the covers. He intertwined his fingers with hers as they hadn't done since they first fell in love, and after a while she went to sleep again. He watched her, and in the back of his mind was the panic that she might die. She mustn't die, he insisted to himself, not as long as she was tormented by one shred of doubt about his love. In the time he needed to quiet her disbelief, he would also rediscover in himself all the love that he would swear he had been feeling all along. So that in the end she would not be deceived.

2

For two days her fever held, and she slept most of the time. Wherever he was in the house, he listened for the movement of her body on the bed so that he could stride at once to the bedroom. He was determined to be with her every moment from the time she awoke until she fell off again into her fevered slumber. He needed her presence more than she needed his.

On the third day he heard the front door open and went out into the hall to see Judith standing there as if she were waiting for him. She too was dressed in black, and the moment he saw her, he sensed that she had changed: there was no longer any hostility in her eyes, neither wariness nor fear of him. All he could see was a love as unabashed as he had ever once hoped for.

"Your father?" he asked, looking at her clothes.

"We buried him the day before yesterday," she said.

"Twenty people have died in Edgartown, and there's no end yet."

"How's Saul?"

"He's home," she replied, innocently unaware that she was saying far, far more: all she knew about her husband was where he might be found, not what he might be feeling or thinking. So John knew that Saul had never touched her, that all his fears had been groundless. But as he looked back, he wondered whether his fear hadn't really been his hope that the tie between Judith and himself could be broken by a strength outside themselves.

"Better go up and see Deborah," he said abruptly. "I think she's awake."

"Wait, John!" she said. "Wait just a minute."

He turned, surprised at her ardour. She caught his hand and held herself warmly to him. Her head was pressed against his chest, and she wept as if she had been holding back tears for a long time.

"It's just that I'm so glad to see you!" she said. "I never knew I'd miss you so much until I saw my father as an old, sick man. I used to be his favourite, and I remembered how good he was to me; and then I began to miss you terribly. I felt dazed and cut off, and nothing was real—not until the coffin was in the ground. Then I knew how stupid I was to fight against the only thing that tells you you're alive. You once told me that, John, and I didn't know what you meant. Now I do, and shame seems foolish, along with anything else that comes between us."

She clung to him with a desperation that demanded all the tenderness he had ever felt for her. She was offering selfless, unquestioning love—as his own Esther once had when she was four years old—and he couldn't move away. Nor did he want to, because she stirred him so deeply. Only a few weeks back

he had been wild to hold her. Now he was ashamed. The face of Deborah came between them for the first time; yet when he kissed Judith, he could tell that nothing was gone for them.

"Go up," he said, holding her away. "Go up at once."

She stayed with Deborah for almost an hour. John remained alone with the decision that the time had come to break with Judith. He must do it now. He could not love two women at once, and Deborah had to be his choice. He prepared himself to tell Judith when she came down. He would ache for her, but it would not be endless.

"She's asleep," said Judith when she joined him again. "I changed the sheets for her and cleaned up the room. Esther doesn't know she's in bed, does she?"

"Deborah didn't want me to write to her."

"Write to her? Esther will be hurt that you didn't send for her. I don't care what Deborah says, she wants Esther with her. You aren't taking the best care of Deborah, John."

"I'm giving her everything I think she could possibly want."

"She wants her daughter. They used to visit each other all the time."

"Until I came home?" he asked, finishing her thought. "I don't know what I ever did to Esther. Maybe it's because I didn't do anything—because I was away all the time. I'll write to her, then, and tell her how things are. She'll know best what to do. Meantime, I'll keep on doing my own best."

"And I'll come over tomorrow again and do whatever you leave out." She laughed. "Men just don't know what to do."

"This is one time that I do know what to do," he said. Then he added, "And I don't think you had better come tomorrow, Judith."

"But I promised Deborah," she said, glancing at him with surprise. "I promised her because she asked me to come."

"I'll say you were here while she was asleep. I'm trying to say something to you, Judith!" he said desperately. "Don't you know what I'm saying?"

She stared at him, and then her face suddenly went pale. Her eyes were filled with a hurt so profound that he knew he had blasted open the most defenceless chasm of her pride. She stood motionless.

"You'd better tell me what you mean, John," she said. "Tell me very plainly."

"I mean that you had better not come tomorrow—or again—until Deborah is well enough to send for you herself. It's got to be that way, Judith. That's the way you always wanted. Now I'm ready to give it to you."

"But it's no longer what I want, John." She tried in vain to quiet desperation. "Something's happened inside of me. I'm changed. I can't fight you any more. I don't want to fight you. Don't ask me to give you up, because I can't."

"How many ways do you want it, Judith?" He spoke roughly—to keep himself from giving in to her. "First it's one way, and you storm at me because I don't do it. When I finally veer around—when I finally find the strength to please you—you want it another way."

"And aren't you wanting it two ways too? You shouted at me to give in to what I felt was wrong. When I was trying to be strong for both of us, you used your greater strength to tear me down. Now you're the one who's changed. John, for God's sake, don't send me away, please! I don't know what I'd do."

He put his hands on her shoulder, meaning no more than to be kind, but she knew only that he was holding her again, and she wept with relief. For him the embrace was gentle and protective. Yet she stirred him, and he was reluctant to let her go. If they had both been free, this would have been the

beginning of deep love. Instead, he forced himself to look beyond, to the end of desire; and when that would come, all the promises he had made to Deborah were going to be true.

"John," she said, "I won't be over tomorrow if you don't want me to. But please let me relieve you for a few hours so that you can go out for a while."

"But I'm getting some time tomorrow morning. Sarah Ann Coffin is coming about ten."

"Then instead of coming, I'll meet you at the cliffs."

"I have so much to do."

"Only for a few minutes," she pleaded. "Just a few minutes. It's been so long since we've been together! All the time my father was dying, I kept thinking of you. When I saw the coffin going down—down into the earth—I knew if I didn't have you to love, I would be so lonely I couldn't bear to live. I suppose that's what's changed me, John. Please come. Please."

With the ruthlessness of a man intent on escape, he knew that the more he saw of Judith in complete capitulation, the sooner he would be able to go to Deborah without any other ties. He agreed to meet her.

When she left, the house was silent. And now he kept asking himself what he had done. He had been determined to break with Judith, but there had been no break. Instead, he had found only another reason to be with her.

Where was his strength? he asked himself. What kind of a man could delude himself into doing exactly what he had planned not to do; could hold in his arms a woman he loved, and coldly calculate what to do to make himself free of her just at the moment she most needed his love? And all the time, sleeping in his protection, trusting him, was his own wife.

If there were deep and unchanging truths about himself, he didn't know what they were. All he knew was that once,

many years ago, he had loved Deborah the way he now loved Judith, and that his love for Deborah had become a calmer thing, perhaps no love at all. His love for Judith, too, would sooner or later have to have an end. Then once again there would be the indefinable longing in him, perhaps never to be satisfied by anyone. But if there was to be any longing in him, then Deborah must satisfy it; he would will it so. He would not meet Judith as he had promised. That would be the test.

That night he wrote a long letter to Esther, but he had to tear up several attempts: every draft sounded stiff and shy.

When Sarah Ann Coffin arrived in the morning, Deborah was asleep and John was dressed to go out.

"You look peaked," she said. "Time you did get into the air."

"There are a lot of chores to be done," he said. "They need doing more than I need air."

"Will you be in the barn if I want you?"

He hesitated, facing the test. "I'll be there later. First I have to go over to the store and mail a letter."

The sun was shining, the sea was blue, and the snow on the road had melted. In the white hills and fields the drifts were rounded into softness. The air was mild, almost warm.

He walked to the store, and every hundred yards or so he was challenged by another path that led southward across the downs to the cliffs. As he passed each fork, he passed the test again, even though he ached to be with Judith with an intensity he had hoped was gone. Coming back was still more painful. Each step he took continually diminished his chances of escape from the stern condition he had imposed on himself.

Sternly he kept to the road until it led him home. To make sure that after all the effort he would not betray himself, he

called to Sarah Ann in the kitchen that she could find him in the barn whenever she wanted.

He worked hard and savagely, making himself blind to what Judith might do or think when she realized that she was waiting in vain, high on the empty sunlit cliffs with the white smashing surf below. He had no explanation prepared for her: to think ahead to a time when they would be talking together again would itself be a violation of the test.

Chapter Thirteen

1

FOR weeks a massive rage had been pressing on Saul with the weight of tons, and the effort to contain it was passing beyond endurance. His eyes were sunk deep into dark hollows, his cheeks were gaunt, and his mouth was a hard pale line as, moment after moment, he held in the words that could only be screamed.

He had been home from Edgartown for half a month now, and every minute of every day since then had been nothing more than one more moment of tense waiting for the next minute to come. Somewhere ahead of him there might be a resting place which he would be allowed to reach if only he could go on crushing down the violence within him.

It was late afternoon, and he was at the window of his parlour, staring out at a new thick snow that had been whirling all day out of the sky. The old oak lashed at the house, but Saul was past hearing it. He stood erect—not with pride, but with the continuing effort to hold himself together; and he could not go on much longer.

He had never before known such an anger; and once he let go, he knew he would behave as no other man he had ever seen. The violence was so black with hatred that he dreaded himself as his own threat of death. He breathed around the great weight like a man gasping with suffocation.

Yet the anger was not pure, because his throat was being seared with the acid of unshed tears. The anger was also profound grief.

Only once before could he ever have known such agony, and that was when his aunt had told him that his parents had perished at sea. Captain David Pengarth had insisted on his wife's company on a short voyage, but he had claimed with equal force that arctic whaling was no place for his frail four-year-old son. Saul always said that being left behind was the first lucky stroke in a lucky life, but his aunt reminded him sharply that he hadn't thought so at the time; that his eyes had been as large and dark as prunes; that he spoke to no one for months; that he hid with terror when people came near, and he used to cry with heartbreak in the middle of a sunny afternoon.

In the intervening forty years Saul Pengarth had often been moved to anger; but what was in him now had room for thirty thousand such angers and all the thunder that had ever crackled across the sky. In his lifetime, too, he had been sad and disappointed—but never could he recall such wild grief.

Within the slight, hard man, grief and rage grappled like lions, while he himself tore at both with bare, bleeding hands. He hated Judith with an intensity that had no words; but if he were to smash her with the pent-up lightning that flickered and spat in his heart, there would be no Judith left for him to love more deeply than he had ever dreamed he could care for anyone—there would be only this clawing ache of tears in his throat.

From outside the house came a deep inhuman groan.

"What was that?" Judith demanded in terror.

"The tree," he replied without turning.

"Are you sure?"

"The wind is tearing it to pieces. And the snow will finish it."

He was silent, because the ponderous dying of the great

tree became momentarily his own death, and he had to wrench himself free.

"The snow is as heavy as it was when we went to Edgartown," he said. His torn throat squeezed every feeling from his voice, so that he sounded merely mild and tired. "But it's coming on to the end of winter, and there just can't be much more snow left. My God!" he suddenly shouted with desperation. "It just can't go on!"

He turned with the fury of his words; and Judith glanced up from her sewing, frightened by his vehemence, which both of them now knew had nothing to do with the weather.

I had better get out of here, he thought in panic. *Otherwise the words are going to come.*

He couldn't move, though. He was reaching the end of his time; and taut as he still held himself, the vast pressures were beginning to crack, scam, and burst.

"Judith," he said with forced quiet, "what is it you want? How are we going to live? Why should I keep you with me any more?"

"Do you want me to leave?"

His face was stricken as his eyes pleaded with her. *Don't say the wrong thing,* he warned silently. *Jesus, woman, help me to keep from killing you! Beg me to let you stay!*

But she was looking at him with pity—pity that maddened him, because who was *she* to feel sorry for him? She was nothing—a pale, plain woman in her thirties—and only his love made her beautiful to him. Apart from that, she was nothing. And yet *she* pitied him! He put his hands to his head. *Judith! Understand what I'm going through!*

"I don't want you to leave, but I don't want you to stay." Squeezed between the massive grinding stones, his voice was still flat. "What good are you to me? Are you a wife because you keep my house, fix my meals? I want more; I need more;

and so help me God——” He began to tremble, and so he closed his eyes and took a very deep long breath before he regained the same seeming control. “I’m going to get more!”

“I’ve tried,” she said. “God knows, Saul, I’ve tried!”

“I’ve tried!” Contempt corroded the last ties of self-mastery; and now the roar in him began to surge out in a thick violence. “Am I a punishment? Am I supposed to thank you for trying? I don’t try with you, Judith, I just love you. I’ve loved you all the years we’ve been together; never more and never less than the most love I can feel. When I came to you in Edgartown, to your father’s house two weeks ago, I was sorry for all the wrong things I ever did. I was ready to make up for all the ways I hurt you.. I wanted to make a new start.”

She spoke in a faint voice and her eyes were closed. She was breathing very slowly, submitting herself to his violence because she had nothing to offer, no feelings, no love, only penance and endless empty patience.

“My father was dying, Saul,” she said. “I loved him very much, and I could think of nothing else. If I turned you aside, it was only because my father was dying.”

“No!” he shouted, meaning, *Don’t be stupid enough to lie any more! Save us. I can’t hold on much longer!* He forced his voice down again. “No, that’s not the way it happens. When you’re frightened, when you’re left alone, you go to the one you love. You run to him; you cling to him; you ask him to put his arms around you and hold you and make things better. You don’t go behind a locked door to be by yourself and cry. No, Judith, it can’t be the way you say at all.”

“We’re different people,” she said. “We just do things in different ways. When you’re sad, you want someone to comfort you, while I——”

And who comforts you, Judith? was the demand that roared through his head.

"—while I," she was saying, "I suppose I like to be alone."

He made no reply, but turned in contempt for her lying—whether she knew she was lying or not—and walked again to the window.

And so there it is, he thought. There's a man she loves: a man she loves the way I love her. She pushed me away in Edgartown not because she wanted to be alone, but because she hated me; and she hated me because I've been keeping her from the other man.

He began to tremble and he could barely steady himself.

She's been with him, he thought suddenly. She's been with him and they've lain together. I know it. They've laughed at me, maybe not out loud, but in their hearts. They've hidden from me. They've looked out of windows, holding each other, nervous because I might suddenly appear.

His stomach turned liquid with contempt—with murder—for himself and for them.

The snow whirled in depth after depth beyond the window. Dusk was grey and thick, as if the end of day, like the end of life, came with nothing but more confusion. The wind-frenzied trees took on changing shapes, and nothing was real out there.

In his mind he saw Judith and her unknown lover, a man with a vague, featureless face. They were in each other's arms. The man was tall. He had broad shoulders, and there was a calm, sure strength about him. He was everything that Saul knew he himself was not.

The lovers embraced each other in his mind. They were making love everywhere he looked. They were outside in the snow, hungry for each other, so ardent that they didn't care whether he saw them or not. He didn't exist for them. They smiled at each other with their longing—blind and deaf to

him as he stood at their side screaming for mercy. They had killed him, and they didn't care that he was dead.

He imagined the lover as he used to skulk around the house, standing in the shadows, waiting for the husband to leave. He had been out there God knows how many hours and on how many days and with what impatience. He could even be out there now, standing behind a tree, waiting for a signal or a note, not minding the cold or the snow because he knew that sooner or later he was going to be warmed in the only way that mattered.

For a moment Saul stiffened as he thought he actually saw him when a rift in the snow made a dark shape move from one tree to another, and then he actually did see him: a tall man in some dark clothing, hurrying lightly from tree to tree, always at a safe distance as he waited for Judith's signal.

Then that was why Judith had been so alarmed at the sound of the dying tree. There was good reason for her to believe the cry might have come from a man in distress.

Saul's trembling became so violent that he had to hold on to the window to support himself.

From the back he looked simply like a tired man, and his voice, tormented by too many madnesses already out of control, sounded so drained of expression as to be almost gentle when he finally said aloud: "There's another man that you love, Judith. Tell me the truth. I say you love another man."

Chapter Fourteen

1

THE terrifying words, so softly spoken, hung in the air unanswered because Judith was stunned by the directness of Saul's insight into her. She was frightened, disarmed, confused.

You know me better than anyone else, she thought. You knew all by yourself what I was forced to put into words for John!

Yet all the time she could hear her own voice insisting passionately: "No, no, Saul! You don't know what you're saying!"

"I know exactly what I'm saying." He sounded so odd to her, speaking only slightly above an exhausted whisper. "You loved him when I kissed you. I came to offer you everything, and you gave me only your check. I turned your face around to kiss your mouth and make you feel what I was feeling, but you were loving him. That's why you tightened against me."

That's true! she thought in despair. An urge for full confession welled up in her throat. With her eyes she pleaded for permission to be cruel to him.

Saul, let me tell you how it happened. You understand so much already; understand all of it, and have mercy on me!

But all the while, the glib voice of evasion was protesting with sincerity: "My father was dying, Saul! How could I think of you at a time like that?"

"That's just the time you would think of me or the man you love."

Don't frighten me! she wanted to scream. If I'm not afraid, I can talk to you. But you've always made me afraid!

"Someone else's death makes you know how alive you are," he went on. "Even before your father died, when I said I wanted to have a long talk with you——"

Saul, Saul, I never heard you, she was shrieking. *I don't remember anything.*

"—I was going to tell you how things would be different, and you brushed past because you were rushing in your mind to that other man."

"My father was dying," she said again quietly; and she remembered only vaguely, too late now, how little she had cared whether Saul was with her or not. *For months now I've never even heard what you were saying unless I happened to look straight at you. You must understand that I've been like a sick woman.*

And all the time, she realized as her hands covered her face, he had been loving her. For months, perhaps years now, he must have been living through the same kind of endless anxiety that had been pressing on her since John failed to appear ten days ago at the cliffs.

I know what it feels like, Saul. It's being afraid all the time even while you're telling yourself there's nothing to fear!

Yet John couldn't have stopped loving her just at the moment when she was ready to admit how deeply she loved him. No, any day now he would appear and let her know with a glance that nothing had changed between them, that he had stayed away so long only because Deborah was ill.

Saul, turn around so I can see your face. You sound like a man bleeding to death inside! I'll tell you everything. And I'll tell it so that it will go away and we can be together without anyone else. But don't look at me if I'm going to see you ache, because I'll just have to go on lying to protect you!

Her picture of Saul as a cold, unloving man had never been true. She had seen only the reflection of her own feeling for him. Like a child, she saw she had assumed that no one could truly love her unless she loved in return—and since her love for Saul had died——

Not died, Saul, I didn't mean that, but I don't know where it went.

—then it must follow that Saul's love for her had also fallen away. Yet the part of her mind that used to speak aloud to herself had only begun at that point and turned everything around, saying: Since Saul doesn't love me, I am justified in not loving him; and I am a poor unfortunate woman married to a cold, unloving man.

Let me say it out loud to you, Saul! Everything is smashed, and I did my half of the smashing. But turn around so that I won't be frightened. I hate you to frighten me!

"I see the whole thing," Saul was saying. "Just as it must have happened."

There was something else he was about to say, but the words had been choked off. She glanced up, terrified by the odd strain.

This time she was able to withhold her repeated denial. She was tense with a sudden desperate hope that he would go on and say, "So the best thing for me to do, Judith, is to leave you and go away. You'll never see me again."

Instead, he turned, and his face was contorted with more pain than she had ever seen in any living man. His revealed hatred of her was paralyzing, but still not as unbearable as the hell of his own torment as he shouted at her:

"He's outside right now! I saw him. I saw him running from tree to tree! Were you two waiting for me to go to sleep? My God, I hate you so much I can't stand it!"

She was so overwhelmed at the outburst that she froze into

pure passivity, making herself transparent to his violence so that it would run through her, leaving her untouched.

His wildness had burst completely from his control, and he shouted at her. He lashed her with words. He was beside himself with grief over having lost her, and the loss had made him beside himself with rage. One frenzy was intertwined with another, and she could not tell whether he loved or hated her more.

The fury was so far beyond reach that she remained silent; and yet beneath her limpidity there grew an answering violence of her own.

It was you who made me a liar, she cried silently with her head bowed and her eyes closed. It's only because I have pity for your pride that I don't stand up and throw the truth into your face. I hate you, too. I've always hated you, and I've always been afraid of you!

There was another reason for her silence, which she held away even from herself. John had not met her at the cliffs. She had kept telling herself that John could not get away. But it made no difference what she told herself: she was no longer certain of John, and so she dared not risk driving Saul to the final break.

Don't leave me, Saul! I've never been alone in my life. I don't know how to be alone! Let me go on being your wife!

"Tell me the truth!" Saul shouted in his agony. "Tell me, or I swear I'll kill you!"

"There's no one!" But her inner feelings were now too close to the surface, and she could not hide her contempt for a man who had never touched her, nor moved her to anything but physical disgust and fear. "You're out of your mind!"

"And you drove me there!"

From behind her own screaming she could still see beyond

his contorted face to the heartbreak and sadness that were tearing him apart. He had loved her—he loved her right now—from the deepest core of his being. He could not bear to lose her any more than she could bear to lose John. She felt more pity for Saul than she could ever do anything about, and so she had to tear herself away from him and hurl him away from her.

So no matter how deeply she saw into him, her instinct for self-preservation stormed back at him in a fury that had its own momentum, its own will, its own frenzied insistence on what she herself knew to be untrue.

“You’re only seeing what you want to see!” she cried. “You twist everything around so you can have a reason to hate me. You never loved me——”

No, Saul, you never did. If you had loved me, I would have loved you!

“You wanted only to own me and to have me be something you could be proud of. Judith Pengarth was never real to you. Nobody ever loved Judith Pengarth!”

“But this man does?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” she shouted with savage relief. “Yes, this man does!”

Saul stood motionless, for finally the truth which he had been demanding her to deny had become the undeniable truth.

“I’ll kill him,” he said. “I always swore I’d kill any other man who had you, and I’ll kill him now!”

She watched him dazedly as she realized that he really meant to go. He was dashing about the room, pulling the navy pistol from his desk, throwing a woollen scarf around his neck with an idiotic intensity. He moved jerkily, like a wooden man. A clown on a stage running around like Saul would have thrown an audience into laughter, but here it was a terrible sight to see a man going to pieces.

She grasped his arm as he passed her. "Saul, for God's sake, don't go. There's no one out there. You'll get lost in the snow."

He laughed. "You're worried about me!"

"Saul," she sobbed. "You'll die. You'll never find your way back."

"I'll find him."

She held on. "Saul, I swear to you there's no one out there. I'll do anything you ask, only stay!"

He pushed her away so that she fell.

"You'll do nothing! You're lying, just as you must have lied to me for more years than I can bear to know."

She raised herself to her elbow and brushed the hair out of her eyes. He was so maddened that he would probably die in the snow, and the guilt for his death would be hers for the rest of her life; yet an impulse over which she had no control made her cry:

"You'll never find him." Even to herself she sounded as if she were laughing at him. On his way to the door he was held with horror at this final cruelty, and then ran crazily out of the house.

She tore over to the window, but Saul had already disappeared around the house. Gathering her skirt, she ran from one window to the next, from room to room, until finally she was back in the parlour. Outside, faintly, she saw Saul running through the snow, staggering through drifts, slipping every few steps, then suddenly darting off at another angle, getting fainter and fainter and more unreal all the time.

"Saul!" she screamed. "Come back!"

Only the empty house heard her. The windows were closed, and beyond the windows was the shouting wind and the tree that lashed at the house in its dying frenzy.

Chapter Fifteen

1

GUSTS of snow whipped through the darkness in an endless parade of fluttering white shrouds. Blinded and breathless, Saul stood still for a moment to get his bearings.

Terrifying confusion seethed through his head. A charge had been released in the very bottom of his soul, and he watched the slow explosion of his own life. Wherever he looked, the chaotic fragments of memory were floating up before his eyes, never to be gathered together again.

In desperation he glanced about, seeking a line of sight through the whirl of flakes; but before he could find himself, he caught still another glimpse of the man halfway down the slope, peering from behind a tree.

The man must have been very crafty; as soon as he was seen, he fled like a ghost across the open ground, crouched for a moment behind a bayberry bush, and then ran toward a small pine. Saul fired at him, distantly surprised at the way the snow muffled the sound. He staggered to where the victim was lying. When he arrived at the pine, panting and gasping from exertion, there was no trace of anybody, not even footsteps.

He tried to catch his breath, but the rage was too massive and he was bursting with it. He had to rest, but he saw the man watching him through the snow from a stand of trees on a farther slope. At once Saul stumbled through drifts that came

to his thighs. When he reached the farther slope, there was no slope at all.

He did not know where he was, and the man was laughing at him—at the idea that Saul Pengarth could be lost in his own hills.

Saul turned around and shouted wildly—a wordless scream of fury—but the man only laughed again. The sound of his laughter was very faint in the wind, or perhaps the laughter had come from behind Saul—it was hard to tell. He had to stand still again because he was reeling with dizziness.

Suddenly the dizziness passed, and with it went the steady upward drift through his head of the debris of a lifetime. For one instant his mind was very clear. No more anger, no more rage, no sadness. Then his stomach twisted in a spasm of sickness and terror that loosened and rose like a bubble through his chest. He watched himself in horrified amazement, wondering what was going to happen. The bubble slid queazily up into his throat and, to his wide-eyed surprise, became a torrent of tears and the furiously shouted words: “Don’t take her away from me! Don’t make her leave me all alone!”

What am I crying about? he demanded as he tried to hold back the sobs. *Who the hell wants her? People have been leaving me all my life ever since my damned father made my mother go to sea with him. I don’t need anybody—to hell with them all!*

His eyes were closed and tears were freezing his lids. As he rubbed them clear, he could just barely make out the fugitive lover a few hundred feet farther on, staggering and leaping like a wraith. Then the snow swept an icy flurry in Saul’s face, so that the man was lost to sight.

The iron hate in Saul pushed him on again. He heard the man crashing off to his right through some bushes. The stems

and twigs waved frantically with the frightened movement and the wind.

From moment to moment, as Saul followed the zigzag path over the hills, the curtains of snow flying on the air parted to show Saul the harried fugitive whirling through all the grotesque attitudes of panic-stricken flight. Sometimes the man turned and glanced palely back at Saul to be sure that he was still pursued; then on he would plunge again into the spiralling darkness. Finally he ceased to appear at all; and Saul, exhausted, sank to his knees in the snow—trembling violently because breathlessness was burning his heart. Every gasp of air was an iron band around his chest; every pain was crucifixion.

The rage was gone, leaving him limp and helpless again in the centre of the slow, upward surge of memory fragments—the broken pieces of himself—rising beyond his reach, dimly recognizable only after they were too far gone to be recalled or understood.

He crouched, his hand shielding his closed eyes from the snow, but nothing could stop the continuing explosion. Through all the murk was the vivid image of Judith and the man, both naked, twined in writhing embrace. All the things he had ever wanted to hear Judith gasp to him she was saying to this man. She was holding her breasts to be caressed. Her body was arched with offering. Saul beat his own face to drive them away. He didn't want to see—he didn't want to hear—but they haunted him. Not *they*—but Judith. The man was not too real. It was Judith who had hurt him. The man was nothing. It was Judith who owed him loyalty; it was Judith who had broken promises; it was Judith who had pushed him away. She was the one he should be blasting out of his life. He could not bear to live knowing that she would go on giving herself to someone else.

He should never have left the house. He reloaded his gun and staggered back up the slope for a while. When he realized that he was not retracing his footsteps, panic began to simmer in him. He did not know his way home.

Yet that was foolish. No man could be lost in his own hills. If only he could get high enough, he would see the lights of the house. He pressed on until he came to what felt like level ground. He peered around. The waving shrouds of snow were too thick, too opaque. There was no light to be seen.

He stood very still, panting for breath, fighting down his terror. A man who could work his way back and forth across ten thousand miles of open ocean could sure enough make his way through his own fields. All he had to do was to hang on to his nerve and keep calm then he would get a bearing and find a line back to the house.

Bend to it, you bastard!

The wind had been north-northwest. Now it was blowing on his back. He had run from the house toward the north-east, so that even though he had doubled back and forth a number of times, he must be standing—— No, it wasn't coming clear to him, not through the confusion that spiralled up through his head.

Up and up went the pieces of his life, like the slow lift of an underwater geyser flecked with sea wrack before the wide-open eyes of a drowning man.

Through the moving haze Judith looked at him with anger and horror from where he had thrown her to the floor, and he heard himself sobbing. *How could she do this to me? How could she do it? How could she do it?*

The black lifelong grief that he carried in his heart once more loosened and climbed his throat like vomit, then transformed itself again into a storm of tears and sobs that racked him until he barely had the strength to stand erect.

I love her so much, he said. I ached for her so long! How could she do it?

With fury he choked off his sobs and shouted aloud at himself to dominate his attention.

"Listen!" he said. *The wind was from the north-northwest, and I ran on a straight line north-east, so I must have run up Barrows Hill, and then over the hill where the old ram died in my grandfather's time.*

Then there was another hill after that, or was it the same hill that he went up and down?

"God's blackest curse on Judith!" he said aloud with slow fervour. "She did this to me! She did this!"

South-west across the wind, he decided with the stately deliberateness of a drunken man intent on taking one step at a time. South-west across the wind until I come to a fence.

He had never felt so cold in his life; yet nothing could stop that upward surge of his broken self—in front of his eyes, within his head, behind him if he cared to look— all flowing upward into the whirling snow, to be blown away forever.

Before him loomed a white shape. Instantly he crackled with renewed rage and fired three quick shots into its heart.

The baby spruce shed some of its snow. Spruce? Then he was in his south pasture, two miles from where he had thought he was. There must be other trees round about. If he could find another that he recognized, then he could take a bearing. Snow whirled in his eyes, and he had to cover them with his numb hands.

He staggered around what he thought was a circle, but through the confusion that swirled in his mind he remembered that there was also a stand of spruce in the east pasture.

"Where am I?" he shouted to the snow.

He was so exhausted he could barely walk. The snow made him dizzy and he stopped again, just to rest. His stomach was

tight and sick with fear that was not the fear of being lost, nor the fear of anything he could name, because it was so vast and ominous that it was robbing him of strength and purpose.

He wanted somebody to take care of him, to pity him, and he wept into his hands as his voice once again came up from a memory buried far beyond his recognition: "Don't let them leave me all alone! Help me! Help me! Help me! Oh God, I'm so afraid! I'm so afraid!"

He took his hands away from his face and realized vaguely that he was stretched out on the snow. He had no memory of falling, and he stumbled wearily to his feet. He would kill them. He would kill them for doing this to him. And he ran for a while, tottering, glad of the terrible anger that was in him, because without it he was helpless. But in a little while the anger softened and melted like wax into sobs, grief, and weakness.

He stopped to rest because he was too weary to care about the lovers. Let them have each other—let them rot together. All he wanted was to find his way back home. He did not need Judith. He never had.

Again he saw that he had fallen. He forced himself to get up, knowing that unless he kept moving he would die. His legs were numb. He was walking on top of the snow on stumps that had no sensation.

His heart ached with breathlessness from all the running. In his ears, his gasps were smothered shouts. He let himself fall again, deliciously this time. The snow was soft. All he needed was just a few minutes—just to close his eyes and catch his breath.

He remained in the snow, groaning like an animal.

In a little while he would be rested. The killing agony would be gone from his chest. The terrible slow upward churning would be gone from his mind, because all the pieces

would have floated away, leaving only sadness. He could tell what the sadness would be like, for it was already beginning to be a weight in his throat.

He would go away to make up to himself for all the years, all the strength and care he had wasted on a woman who had never been worthy of him.

There were still so many things he could do. He made plans, but then he had to make them faster and faster to keep up with the suddenly growing sadness that was getting heavier and heavier, drenching him, then drowning him with paralyzing futility, for he knew that he had wasted his entire life. All the bright promises he had ever made to himself when he was young were never going to be kept. All the brave hopes had been in vain. All the happy times had been only clown's laughter; and all the tears had not been worth the shedding.

He had never realized that sadness could be so heart-breaking. Yet he had never been so comfortable and serene. The pain, happiness, and confusion all grew very distant; and Saul thought only of the lovely snow falling on his face; the gentle snow that was taking care of him.

Chapter Sixteen

1

FOR the first time that John could remember, Uncle Billy Bascom came rushing into the house without knocking. It was bleak dawn on a sunless day when John was awakened, and the night's heavy snow covered half the pane. Uncle Billy was standing just below in the hallway, shouting:

"Captain John! Captain John! Get down here!"

The old man sounded so frantic that John hurried down the steps in his nightshirt, a woollen robe still over his arm.

"I found Saul Pengarth dead," said Uncle Billy. "Looks like he spent the night in the snow, about half mile from his house. Give me a hand with him."

John stared at him.

"You sure it's Saul?" He spoke slowly out of shock.

"Sure? My God, I knew Saul Pengarth since before he could walk!"

An imprisonment of all the past years, of everything Saul had said, closed in about John.

"Did he kill himself?" he asked.

Uncle Billy's eyes widened. "Now, why in hell should he do that? Looks like he just froze."

"But what was he doing out in the snow?" John insisted.

"For Christ's sake, I don't know!" said the old man, almost hysterical. "No boots, no coat or sou'wester, no hat—nothing. Just a scarf around his neck and a pistol in his hand."

"A pistol?"

"A pistol," Uncle Billy snapped. He was talking to a child, not his employer.

Upstairs Deborah had heard only the rumble of voices, and she asked John what had come over Uncle Billy. She was alarmed.

"I never heard him swear and curse so!" she said. "He doesn't sound like himself. What in the world's possessed him?"

"Something's happened to Saul," John said as he dressed with frenzied haste. "He got lost in the snow last night. I don't know how bad it is."

Deborah threw off the covers. "I'll go to Judith," she said.

"You'll stay right here. You're a sick woman," said John. "Just because Esther's gone home, don't think you're all better." His hands were shaking. "If you're needed, I'll tell you."

"Where's Saul now?"

"I don't know!" he almost shouted, wondering why he didn't tell her that Saul was dead. Or would saying the words make them too real to bear?

Outside, the day was bitter, still, and grim. Wherever he looked, the land was an unshadowed white, rolling between dark grey sea and dark grey sky. The stone fences had disappeared. The roads were gone. Mounds of snow stood where there had been trees. Everything looked strange, shapeless, and unreal.

The snow was so dry, it squealed under their boots. Uncle Billy pulled the sled he used for winter chores. Nothing less than a team of oxen could have wallowed a path for a sleigh or a wagon.

"It's five below," said Uncle Billy. "I swear to God I never saw the beat of this winter. More snow, more cold, more sickness, more death. God damn it, it's like the face of the

Lord got turned away. Why, right now, if a man pumped his bilge it would freeze so fast he'd have to walk backward to keep from getting lanced!"

John turned to look at him in amazement; and the old man, gasping for breath, turned on him with senseless fury.

"I knew Saul before you were born. When his folks went away and got lost at sea, me and his aunt were the only two people he didn't run away from! When he was a' grown, he didn't have the time of day for me, and I didn't much like him as a man. But I'm remembering him when he was that little boy!"

"All right, Uncle Billy, all right. He was my best friend, I guess."

"Maybe he was, but you didn't like him much."

"Maybe nobody did, but still he was my best friend."

"I guess so. I know you feel bad. I'm sorry."

"Then let's stop talking. It's going to be a long hard walk."

It took almost two hours of gasping work for the two men to get to the body and haul him home. Saul's hand was frozen about the pistol, and the useless scarf was as stiff as wood.

They found Judith sitting on the sofa in the parlour, her hair disarrayed, her face stupid with shock. The bottom of her skirt was still wet and bedraggled from melted snow. She didn't move when the men opened the door, as if she had been dazed for too long.

"He's dead, Judith," John said. "What do you want us to do?"

She shook her head slightly, so deep in a dream that she seemed to have given up hope that her words would ever find a way out.

"We'll put him in the spare bedroom," said John.

She raised her head and looked at him for a moment of

profound meaning, and he saw that she was a different woman. She knew depths of passion and feeling beyond anything she had ever shown him before.

"Uncle Billy will go for the minister," he said. "You didn't sleep all night, did you, Judith?"

Again she shook her head with that small dazed movement.

John turned to go, but she stopped him.

"Put Saul in his own bed," she said, able to speak at last. She sounded lifeless. "That's where he belongs!"

When Uncle Billy had gone, John returned to the parlour where Judith still sat. She had gathered her hair into a clumsy knot, but that was all. She seemed to have fallen back into the daze.

"The neighbours will all be coming in to help you and to take care of Saul. Before they come, tell me what happened," he said, but there was suppressed dread in his voice. "What was Saul doing in the snow?"

2

For a long time she made no answer, then from far away she asked: "Why didn't you meet me that day at the cliffs? I waited for you for hours. Even after I knew you were not going to come. Was it because you couldn't, or because you no longer wanted to?"

He was silent for a moment.

"I can't remember, Judith," he said gently. "What was Saul doing in the snow?"

Her eyes widened with questioning. "You can't remember?" she asked, soft with wonder. Then very slowly she looked down at her clasped hand. "Saul thought he saw somebody. He was looking for a man."

"Why did he have the pistol?"

"He wanted to kill the man, I suppose," she said. He could scarcely hear her. "He was afraid."

"Who was the man, Judith? Do you know him?"

She shook her head slowly. Then she raised her eyes, and he saw infinite pity and compassion for himself.

"I don't know. He didn't say," she said.

"He just picked up the pistol and ran out?"

She nodded, and once again she spoke out of a distant dream.

"It was only ten days ago that we were supposed to meet at the cliffs. Eleven days. And you can't remember that far back?" she asked. He said nothing. "When you didn't want to come," she went on, "was it because you had stopped loving me, or because you still loved me and wanted to stop?"

"Judith, there's no time! He picked up the pistol and just threw the scarf around his neck?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't make him put on anything else?"

A ghost of a bitter smile touched her lips, then terror haunted her eyes, and finally her face was smooth and expressionless again.

"Things happened so quickly. Nobody stopped to think."

"But there was no man out there, Judith. If there had been footsteps, they'd be covered by now. But there isn't any sign at all of anyone else."

"I told Saul there wasn't anybody."

"You knew it all along?"

"There isn't any man like the man he described," she said slowly, and her voice changed. "Did you know you weren't going to meet me at the cliffs when you promised you

would? Was it an outright lie to my face, John, or was it something that happened to you after I was gone?"

"I can't remember, Judith. No, it wasn't a lie. I don't think I ever lied to you."

She sighed. "No, John, I don't suppose you ever did."

"Your dress is wet. Did you go out after him?"

"Several times. I'd wait here and then go frantic all by myself, and I'd think he was just outside someplace—that he'd fallen down in the snow or something—and so I'd go a little way. Then outside the snow was so wild I'd be afraid of getting lost myself, and I'd come back. I'd wait here a little while more, but the tree was sounding like all the agony in the world. The fear would start all over again, so I'd have to go out. But I didn't ever go far. I was never out of sight of the house."

"Didn't you go out right after him when he left?"

Again his question made her look at him with pity.

"No," she said quietly. She shook her head. "No."

"You thought he'd see there was no one there?"

Still looking at him, she nodded.

He waited, and then asked the one question to which he wanted no answer.

"Did you and he have a quarrel, Judith?"

Again, like a small girl, she shook her head.

"No, John," she said. "Saul and I never quarrelled. He kept everything to himself."

Tenderly he put his arms about her to comfort her, and she neither resisted nor sought him. They sat that way for several minutes. He didn't know what to do or say. She seemed such a great distance away from him. Then suddenly her arms clutched him tightly and her body broke into a convulsive shaking of tears.

"God forgive me, John!" she sobbed. "I love you. I love you. And I killed him!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, not moving.

"Because I once said that I would rather he were dead than know about us. Whatever stood between us has always been removed, then smashed, and now killed. Saul stood between us. I'm terrified that it's not finished yet, John. It's not finished!"

Chapter Seventeen

1

DURING the early grey hours of the day solemn-faced neighbours trudged and stamped into the hushed house of mourning. From the doorway one could look back over the white hills and fields and see other small black figures who had heard the news move singly in the snow, bent forward with the effort of pushing through the drifts to one of the paths that led to the Pengarths'.

Anyone's death would have stirred condolence—but only Saul Pengarth's end could have called out so many on such a day. He had seemed a man of purest whalebone—supple, hard, bleached, and tough; and if he could die, then every man had the right to this sudden uneasiness that was driving them from their homes with an inner need to be among other living men, to test their fragile liveness against the silence of Saul.

A team of oxen paired beneath a groaning yoke was brought to trample a path from the house to the road. The heavy beasts lunged and heaved through snow that sometimes came up to their necks. Other teams of oxen were sent to work up and down the highway. A pair was loaned to Aziel Burr so that he could get into the graveyard. Through the still air, the distant cries of "Gee-haw!" and the crack of whips came as random echoes of each other across the rolling hills.

Out in Saul's barn, Israel Norton hobbled back and forth on crutches as he directed the making of the coffin. He had, as he said, "laid the keel" for a stout box of pine board, when

word came from the house that Judith had suddenly called to mind some Chinese teak which Saul had brought home years ago for just this purpose. Israel grumbled a bit, but the whims of the dead had to be respected. The pine was discarded, the heavy teak hauled down, measured, and cut. The men were just beginning to comment on the fine working quality of the wood, when once again another messenger from the house reminded Israel that he was not to forget the length of oaken top-gallant spar on which Saul had floated for four and a half days in the Indian Ocean.

"She says Saul always wanted it built into his coffin——"

"Avast, there!" snapped Israel. "The oak goes in, but nothing more, or else there w. n't be room aboard the coffin for Saul. I know about that spar, all right. Used to hear him myself in the store: 'That piece of oak once saved my life. Maybe the damned thing will help save my soul!' And be jiggered if I didn't promise to rig it up for him. Never thought I'd keep my word. Mind now, tell Judith this is the way she goes—a teak coffin with oak fittings is a fancy enough coffin for any man!"

Except for these impulsive and desperate gestures to call back the tormented man who had run blindly out of the house and still stormed out again and again, unseen by the visitors, Judith sat in her parlour, locked into herself. The neighbour women came in by pairs, turn and turn about, to cook for her and to take care of the house while their husbands spelled each other doing the rough chores.

They came without disturbing her, made the necessary decisions among themselves, and saw to it that she was as comfortable as she could be under the circumstances.

Judith's pale silence surprised no one. Over the years the town had seen too many women through the same thing.

"It'll take a little time for her to realize what has happened,"

they said. "A woman with no children has nothing but her husband. When he dies, she dies with him for a while. She's holding it all inside, but she'll come round in time. They always do."

Saul was to be buried five days after he died. His friends thought proper to hold off for the news to get to Edgartown, Vineyard Haven, and New Bedford, so that other whaling masters could have a chance to come and pay their last respects. A pale sun and a clear sky made the day gleam in white innocence while oxen and wains slowly carried the mourners together.

All morning a straggling procession could be seen from the Gosnold house, and Deborah refused to be kept in bed any longer. She was determined to go to the graveside.

"I must, John. Even if I were ten times again as sick, I would get up for Saul. It's the way he died," she said. "If he had died at sea, you could say you had to expect it. If he had been sick at home, you would have been prepared; but this way didn't make any sense at all. Just struck down, blown away, by a snowstorm that couldn't have had any other purpose!"

"Don't say that!" John said sharply.

"It isn't blasphemy," she said in surprise.

"Blasphemy be damned! Saul was not struck down or blown out of anybody's way." He could not suppress his passionate insistence. "Saul died in his own time, and in the way he was going to die. That's all there is to it."

She turned at his tone and looked at him with penetrating surmise. She started to reply, then pressed her lips together, but eloquence was in her eyes.

"What are you thinking?" he demanded; and then, when she still remained silent, he said in a tired voice, "All right, Deborah, you may go, but fit yourself out extra warm. Your

fever is hanging over too long by far. You'll come home right after the services and get back into bed. That's the one condition."

When the prayers were over and the coffin had been lowered in the brown hole in the snow, John took her arm to lead her away. She refused to move. She could not take her eyes away from Judith.

"I'm not going home, John," she said. "I'm going over to Judith's."

"You promised!"

"Then I'm breaking my promise," she said. "Either you take me to Judith's or I'll get someone else to take me."

"You can make Judith's tomorrow or the day after. I can't let you get another attack while you're still so weak."

"When did you see her last?"

"I don't know. I stopped by and spoke for a moment to Vail Adams, who was doing her chores."

Deborah stood unmoving in the snow, still looking down the slope at Judith by the freshly filled grave.

"Men are so hard to understand, so strange," she said slowly. "They can be so cruel."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe I'm the one who's strange to think the way I do," she said, sighing. "Anyway, I do feel that way, and so I'm going home with her."

2

He stood, tall and awkward, in Judith's parlour with the other men while the women moved through the house preparing and serving food. Everyone spoke in hushed tones. After a while the people began to leave, and John went into

the back sitting room to find Deborah alone with Judith. They were seated opposite each other; Judith, as usual, in her rocker. She was wearing her black dress. One of the neighbours had dyed the lace collar and cuffs black for her. Her face was drawn and thin, and there was a deep exhaustion in her stillness. She barely glanced up at John.

"You had better let me take the oak tree down," he said. "The trunk must be split clear to the ground, and it stands out there like a crippled thing. A three-knot breeze will send it crashing."

"Don't touch that tree, John," Judith said in a faint voice.

"It might fall against the house. Two ton of dead weight, I make it——"

"I've come to hate that tree," she said. "But things outside will look too different without it, and I'm not that ready yet for changes everywhere." She controlled herself. "After a while it can come down."

"You haven't been sleeping," Deborah said to her. "Just by looking at you I can tell you haven't closed your eyes in maybe a week."

"Sometimes I nap," said Judith.

"Dr. Archer can give you something."

"I'd rather not sleep," Judith said slowly. "I have so much to think about."

"That's foolish," said Deborah. "You're not really thinking. Things are just going round and round. I should have come before."

Judith shook her head. "Someone is with me all the time," she said with the weariness that was as deep as her soul. "I'm never left alone."

"But nobody is taking care of you. You need somebody to tell you what to do and to care if you don't do it."

Judith turned and looked out of the same window through

which she had screamed for Saul to return. "Yes," she said. "There was always someone to do that for me."

She fell silent and moved far away from them beyond her silence. Then in a few minutes she returned, frowning slightly until she recalled the words which had sent her roaming into herself. "But I don't want to sleep, Deborah—not for a while, anyhow."

"Are you afraid?" Deborah asked gently.

Judith nodded. "Yes. Once I slept." Her eyes darkened with the memory of nightmare. "I don't want those dreams again."

"I'll sit by you," said Deborah. "I'll hold your hand, and if the dreams come, I'll wake you up. But they won't come. I'll be taking care of you."

Deborah's tenderness flowed out of her to the self-imprisoned woman, and John was lonely outside their communion. He felt Deborah's strength and compassion, and understood the ways in which he differed from her. Deborah's love would always be abiding, calm, and full of the forgiveness of understanding; his was fierce, demanding, and wilful in comparison.

He had no idea of what Judith thought of him any more, if she thought of him at all. Neither her glance nor a single inflection of her tired voice told him whether she loved him, hated him, or was merely filled with contempt when she measured him against the husband she had lost. She was more inscrutable now than ever before.

"I'm going to stay with Judith," Deborah said to him. "I'll give you a list of things I want you to get for me."

At this stage of Deborah's lingering fever, to be out of bed was dangerous for her. She needed care, but he knew that she would be inflexible.

"Very well," he said as he rose, refusing to argue. "Tell me what you want and I'll get it."

Deborah remained with Judith for a week, and the house was lonely without her. John took his supper with the two women every day, sitting in Saul's place at the table. Judith's silence was unrelenting. She ate what was put before her like a dutiful child, she would answer briefly when she was called upon, but most often she was staring into inner distances. Not for more than a moment at a time could she look away to the world immediately about her, and then John would feel the full weight of her gaze on him—a merciless appraisal that measured the way his hands carried food to his mouth, the way his jaws worked when he chewed, the way he held himself in Saul's place at the table. He had, with casual assurance, walked up to the scrutiny of many strangers in his life; but never before had he been pinned in crucifixion by eyes that cut him open without pity. She would look at him that way for several minutes and then glance down again without any change in her expression.

Neighbours still kept to their schedule of visits, but no one pressed sympathy on her, and no one tormented her with direct questions about what had happened on the night Saul died in the snow. The questions which the town wanted answered were asked elsewhere.

In Norton's store men gathered about the iron stove, and sooner or later one of them would start the talk. "I'm still studying about Saul out in that snow."

"And what do you make of it?"

"No more than I did last week—nothing; but it sure does beat everything. It's the pistol, I guess."

"It was loaded, wasn't it?"

"Loaded and cocked. Right, John?"

"Gun was loaded all right," John would say quietly.

"The way I figure is that Saul really saw a face at the window," another man said. "With all that snow, even a stray sheep looking in could give a man a start. Just a pair of eyes rolling, and then gone a minute later."

"Maybe you see man-eating sheep, Tom; but there isn't a sheep or a shark in the world that ever gave Saul Pengarth a start! By God, Saul frightened by a sheep with rolling eyes!"

"Funny things happen. The old squaws at Gay Head tell some strange ones to make you hair curl——"

"A cannibal witch on Suratonga didn't gally Saul. Guess a Gay Head witch wouldn't do much better."

"Just the same, Old Mary is neither witch nor fool, and she said Saul saw his father's spirit in the snow and went out to kill him, only the spirit killed him first."

"Old Mary said that?"

"Old Mary said Saul believed his father murdered his mother by taking her north with him, and his father's spirit hated Saul for thinking that and studied to get even. Old Mary knows things."

"I don't like that kind of spirit talk in my store," Israel said. "You fellows can't gam about Saul without bringing in spirits, then leave him be."

"Old Mary saw Saul laid out, and she said she could tell from his face that Saul saw his father before he died. Saw him and spoke to him."

"Belay that!" John said sharply, and rose to leave. "Saul saw nobody and spoke to nobody that anybody knows about. And there's an end to it."

"Which is all Old Mary ever said!"

One entire session of the Board of Selectmen was spent in the same endless conjecture, and John sat through all of it in silence. After an hour or so everyone came to the conclusion that Saul must have gone out of his mind; but that merely

changed the nature of the unanswered question to "What was so fearful that it drove Saul crazy?"

John sat with his hands clasped, sensing the truth, but still refusing to look at it.

4

One day of cold followed another. The grey wind blew salt spray over the downs, and the snow began to disappear from the southerly face of the hills. The northern slopes were in the lee, and there the drifts remained like white spectres hiding from the sea wind.

One afternoon, while John was at work in the barn, the groan and squeal of an oxcart coming into his road made him put down his leatherworking tools. He went to the door and saw Deborah seated stiffly beside another woman, Mrs. Kincaid, who held the reins. Deborah waited for him to come to her.

"Bear a hand, John," she said faintly. "I'm dizzy."

Alarm flooded John as he reached up for her. Her hands were hot and feverish. Her eyes were misted, and her heavy face was drawn with the effort of holding herself erect.

"Get her to bed at once, John," said Mrs. Kincaid. "I was visiting Judith when I saw Deborah looked faint. First she didn't want to come home, but we made her. I'll go fetch Dr. Archer, if you think best."

"I don't know," said John. He wanted the doctor, but he was terrified to think that he needed him. "She's had the fever before and come through it."

"But this is the second time," said Mrs. Kincaid. "When it comes back, that's when it's worst. I'd better go."

Deborah was trembling. She had to stop every few steps and

lean on him because the least effort made her lose her breath. When he had undressed her and put her to bed, she closed her eyes and sighed in relief.

"I'm glad I'm here," she confessed. "I'm afraid I'm good and sick this time, John." She moistened her lips continually as she spoke. "Everything's going round and round, even with my eyes closed. And so fast! It's never been like this before."

"Do you hurt anyplace?"

"In my chest a little when I breathe. I don't think about it much because I'm going round and round—very slowly, and in great wide circles. You warned me, I know."

"I should have done more than warn you," he said with rough tenderness. He took her hand in his. "I should have made you listen. You don't stir from that bed until I sing out."

"Yes, John," said the exhausted woman obediently.

"And the first thing I say is to go to sleep and get some rest."

She nodded and closed her eyes. Within a few minutes her breathing was slow, deep, and very regular. He gently placed her hand down on the comforter, and she did not awaken.

He was deeply frightened. For the first time he felt incapable of taking care of her all by himself. In every spell of sickness like this, the return of the fever always meant pneumonia. He wished there were someone else in the house to stand by and help him, to tell him that things were going to be all right; but he was afraid to go for aid in case Deborah might wake up alone in the house, calling out to nothing but an answering silence.

In the kitchen, he went through his stock of elixirs for something to abate fever. When he returned to the bedroom, her sleep was still sound, but now her breathing was heavy and erratic. Her forehead was hot to his touch.

He sat by the bed. Every time her breath caught, he thought she was about to awaken; but her sleep was too thick. Sometimes she murmured words he could not catch; sometimes she moved, trying to run away from a dream that pursued her through the fever. Yet as he sat there hour after hour with Deborah, nothing could keep his thoughts from moving across the hills to Judith. No matter where he turned in the brooding caverns of his mind, Judith's face was the pale glow at the end of every darkness. She must hate him, he decided: he had failed her, he had deserted her, and every promise he had ever made had become a disappointment. By now she probably believed that he had never loved her.

Let it be that way, he thought. Let that be the end.

Beyond reach of words, though, were the memories which nothing could destroy or distort. Separate incidents took on lives of their own, independent of his will—they haunted him like the legends he had heard in his childhood, and each was its own world. In one, he and Judith would forever walk along the same strip of sunlit winter beach; in another, they were eternally locked in one another's arms in a dark attic corner; in a third, they would always be sitting side by side on a jolting sleigh that was lost in an immensity of falling snow and unspoken desire.

These were thoughts that would never be lost, but still he tried to escape them.

Leave me alone, he pleaded silently with Judith. I want to feel nothing for you.

Toward midnight the doctor came into the candlelit room. The examination of Deborah was brief.

"It's pneumonia, sure enough."

"What are her chances?" John asked. "It's not too bad a case, is it?"

The doctor shrugged as if to say: How do you want me to tell you what you don't want to hear, and still tell you the truth?

"It all depends on her," Archer said aloud. "If she's lucky, she'll be all right. Her chances are as good as anyone's in her condition."

"You're not telling me anything about Deborah," said John with bitter resignation. "You're just telling me that words mean themselves!"

"How else do you want me to put it?"

"Tell me she'll live."

"Whenever you took a vessel to sea, could you promise the owners you'd bring her back?"

"It's not the same."

"You'll have to get used to thinking it's the same."

For three days Deborah's body burned itself from the infection in her lungs. About midnight on the fourth day she was wakeful and clear. Her fever had gone down, but John knew too well that this was only the way a fire flickered when there was more ash than fuel.

Deborah asked how long she had been asleep. She said nothing when he counted the time, but her face was grave. She knew what the cost would be.

"The doctor says there's nothing to worry about," John insisted. "He says you're one of the strong ones."

Her exhausted eyes thanked him for lying. She lay in silence for a while, looking at the ceiling.

"John," she said quietly, "I'd like to talk."

"About anything you want."

"I'd like to talk," she went on, "about the thing that's been so hard to fit into words."

He sat down on the bed and asked with despair: "Are you sure we have to? Things happen at sea that never get written

into the log. Things that are so hard to fit into words are maybe better left unsaid."

"But this has gone unsaid for so long!" she said. "And I'm too tired to hold it in any more. It's been making an ache that I don't have the strength to bear now. It's your turn to be strong." Passion burst open within her. "And it's my turn to be listened to before it's too late."

"You're going to be all right," he insisted.

"Then this will be something we will have finally talked about. Even now I don't know why I've spared you so long. You didn't spare me."

He said nothing, knowing very well that he could honestly protest how sorry he was and tell her how deeply he had felt the shame of inflicting pain on her, but a still deeper honesty would not let the words come out because he knew that he himself would have treated such a plea with contempt. When a man plunged a knife into a friend's back, crying, "How it hurts me to do this to you!" he talked only to deafen himself against the cry for help he would not answer.

"When I first began to guess what was happening between you two," said Deborah, "I told myself that it couldn't be true: I was making it all up. Then I would see you and Judith look at each other, or hear something in your voices, and know that I was making up nothing."

"Deborah——"

Her hand clenched his sharply. "Don't talk. Let me get it all said, John——"

"But it's over, Deborah. It's all finished."

"Not for me!" she said. "All this time I've kept these things to myself, hoping that if I said nothing and allowed matters to run their course you would find it easier to come back to me. I had waited twenty years for you to come home, I could wait a little longer, I thought. I was used to waiting."

"I *am* home now."

"And welcome!" she said with quiet irony. "But I don't know that I'm there to greet you any more. Maybe it took you too long; maybe there was only so much waiting in me; but I feel very far away from you. I see you, I'm touching your hand, I long to feel for you what I used to feel—but I'm a thousand miles away, feeling only emptiness. Something in me is broken. The edges are sharp and, oh God, how they cut!"

"It'll mend itself, Deborah. Believe me, whatever's broken will mend, and you'll come back."

"To what?" she asked wearily. "To whom?"

His dark face was serious and unutterably sad. He was silent for a long time, then he said simply: "To me."

"Then you don't know how I really see you now. For a long time I used to think that all this was my fault, or maybe a punishment. I couldn't believe that you were a man to do something without a reason. But it *wasn't* my fault; and from the moment that truth hove into sight, you stopped being the John Gosnold who used to sail master of a vessel, master of a crew of fifty, and most of all master of himself. You became nothing more than a frantic, frenzied, impatient man who just couldn't help himself. I was sorry for you, but mostly I was angry with you for being so much less than I had always believed.

"I couldn't stand being in the same bed with you, and yet there once was a time when I used to want you so much I was ashamed to admit it. For years I used to wonder how I'd bear it until you came back from sea, and now I was thinking of packing my clothes and going to Edgartown to stay with Esther—just to be away from you. I don't know how many nights I stayed awake after you had gone to sleep because my throat ached, but I was not going to cry," she said stonily. "If it killed me, I was not going to cry, because you were no

longer worth crying about. You were only a man who was lying to my face, even though you said nothing. You were only a man who was hiding from me, even though you walked around in broad daylight."

"What should I have said, Deborah?"

"I don't know. I can't help you now."

"I'm not asking for your help. What I did, I did; and I won't try to talk it away. What made me do it, I don't know. It doesn't make much difference one way or another. Nor is there much point in telling you I'm sorry. You already know it. You knew it all along."

"There is a point in saying it," she said strongly. "At least it's you who are saying it, not me having to say it to myself for you. Yes, I do want to hear you say you're sorry, even though it won't change anything."

"Then I'll tell you that I'm more sorry than you could have guessed. Before I ever knew you, there was a girl I loved very much and had to leave. I knew I was never going back to where she was. I used to think of her all the time, and I could hardly wait for the day to come when I would stop loving her so that I could be free of a terrible curse. Finally it came, and there was no freedom, for to feel nothing was worse than anything that had gone before. It was like being all alone, forsaken, in the middle of the ocean—the grey sky is miles above, the grey sea is a thousand fathoms deep beneath the rotting raft, and not a sail ever to be seen again anywhere on the round horizon. I married you because I wanted someone I would never have to leave and never stop loving. Everybody has that dream, but for me it was more than that—I wanted you with the same desperation with which I'd want to be saved from drowning."

He was in the half-darkness beyond the candle's light, and he turned his sombre face to the sick woman.

“Whatever I had with Judith didn’t change the way I felt about you except to make it rotten with guilt. Take me back, Deborah,” he pleaded suddenly. “Let me stay with you all the time, and soon things will be the way they used to be.”

“They can’t ever be. Too much has been broken, and there isn’t that much time left.”

“Let me try.”

She moved her head slowly on the pillow. “If only it were as easy as asking for permission!”

“Help me.”

She nodded with closed eyes. “I’ll try, John, in every way I can.”

For a while they were silent together, holding hands. It was only when her fever began to mount again, toward morning, that his terror returned.

Chapter Eighteen

1

TERROR is a witch whose sorcery makes a man murder his own righteous anger, so that he stands before danger, writhing in the bonds of self-inflicted helplessness, unable to run either right or left, afraid to raise his arms either to fight back or protect himself—because the witch has whispered, “Everything you ever did was wrong; whatever you do now can only make matters worse. You cannot escape.”

Until now John had never submitted. He had won his first command at sea because he had refused to be conquered. At twenty he had been first mate aboard the unlucky *Neptune's Queen*, a three-hundred-ton bark out of New Bedford with less than one hundred barrels of sperm to show for two years in the Pacific. A storm of screaming wind had gushed out of the Java straits late one black afternoon, so full of violence that the waves were ripped into spume at the very moment of forming. The sea was pressed smooth by a million tons of air. The wall of wind had rammed against the *Queen* full on her beam, laying her flat even after every stitch of shortened sail had exploded out of her yards.

On her beam's end, the *Queen's* hull was so strained that individual timbers worked loose and groaned about the very nails that secured them to the ship's ribs. The pumps had to be manned, and men walked on the bulkheads that had been their walls; to move along the deck was like scaling the face of a precipice. Except that no man can ever truly believe his

, own death is imminent, there was no reason to think that the ship or any of the crew could survive the screaming night.

Hour after hour the drenched, wind-stunned men kept working. Toward morning the ship scraped a reef and broke its back with a crash like the felling of a hundred trees, a noise that made each man feel as if files were rasping on his own bones and nerves. The captain, lashed to the wheel post, let the spokes spin at will as he burst into tears and sobbed, "I don't know what to do any more! I don't know what to do!"

A witch was in the man, but John had seen nothing but a weakling who filled him with raging contempt. He stood beside the besotted captain on the breaking quarter-deck and carried out the salvage even though he was sure that before his next shouted command he himself might either be drowned by a wave or brained by one of the crashing spars.

Now, for the first time, John understood how that other man must have felt—he had been in control of too many things for too long against too many odds—and he was face to face with his own inability to go on making the world seem a ball to be bounced and tossed at his will.

Every man, in his hours of success, tastes godhood. At midnight when the masquerade is over, the clowns still laugh, the harlequins still dance, but only the men who came dressed in power patched with luck look down with horror at the shabby garb they have been wearing for all the magic evening. Gods meet their end with a rage that can destroy the world, while uttering the cries of frightened children.

2

With her eyes closed in the candlelit bedroom, Deborah seemed very far away from him. As long as they had been

talking from their deepest hearts, they had been holding on to each other. He had been able to retain the life that remained in her, and she had been able to raise up in him the man he had always wanted so desperately to be. Now the sustaining tie was broken. He could not hold on to her any longer, but neither could he resign himself to her release. In any event, the choice was out of his hands, and because he was a man completely without alternatives, he was ready to cry out to anyone who came along: "I don't know what to do any more! I don't know what to do!"

He strode back and forth in the half-darkness, clasping and unclasping his hands with anxiety. If he hurried over to the Bascoms' cottage, he could be back in half an hour with Uncle Billy's wife, whose knowledge of elixirs and herb medicines, at this moment, seemed an unmatched wisdom to him. He wondered how he dared go, and then abruptly ended his pacing. He had been thinking of Deborah as if she, instead of himself, were filled with panic; but the truth had always been that Deborah was unafraid. If she should awaken and find him gone, she would certainly realize that he was only off for help and she would wait patiently for his return.

He dressed quickly, lit a lantern, and hurried out into the moonlit fields of snow. The path to the Bascoms', tramped down by Uncle Billy, lay like a black ribbon before him. The night was quiet, and high clouds turned black as they crossed the golden moon.

He had to pound for some time on the cottage door before Uncle Billy unshuttered the upstairs window.

"Tell your wife to dress right away. I need help. Mrs. Gosnold is very sick."

The shutter slammed closed, and after a few seconds Uncle Billy in long grey drawers swung the door open for him, but John did not enter the house.

“She’ll be down in a minute,” said Uncle Billy. “Why don’t you go along home? I’ll get my woman after you just as fast as I can.”

“But I’m not bound straight for home,” said John, and as he spoke the unexpected words, he realized with horror that they must have been lying coiled in the back of his mind all along. He was shocked by what he said, but still he could not keep himself from continuing: “I’m going to Pengarth’s to get Judith. I want her there, too, to help. I’ll be home in twenty minutes at the outside, so you might even be getting there before me.”

He avoided the puzzled question already forming on the old man’s face, and turned away to strike out across the snow before Uncle Billy offered to go ^{for} Judith for him.

As he went, he knew that there was no use berating himself. In spite of all that had happened, he still felt the need for one moment of complete privacy with her in which they would be free to exchange understanding. His concern for Deborah was unabated; but just as strong was his desperation to see himself in Judith’s eyes, to know what had happened since Saul’s death. He strode over the hills, knowing that he should be with Deborah even though he was walking away from her, and all the while his stride was free and forceful.

The grey square house was dark, and the black windows glinted in the midnight gold of the moon. A few seconds after he knocked, he could see a lighted candle mark Judith’s hurried descent from her bedroom. The candle glow flickered and waved, throwing weird shadows on the curtains.

“Who is it?” she called through the door.

“It’s John. Let me in. Deborah’s deathly sick.”

“I’ll dress and come right over.”

“Let me in for a minute.”

"No, John."

"Please!" he insisted.

The candle in her hand threw delicate shadows on her face that deepened her wary watchfulness. She opened the door wide that she could stand back and away from him in her flowing white nightdress. Her nightgown hung loose but was subtly shaped by the naked body beneath. He had never seen her except when she had been fully dressed, and he was struck with the poignancy of how little they had ever had together, and how furtive and snatched that little had been. He could see that she sensed the desire which leaped past his guard, but he could also see that she did not realize that along with his desire went sadness and infinite regret.

He lowered his glance, angry because she was undervaluing his feeling for her, and ashamed that she should see him in this moment of his ultimate infidelity to Deborah. He himself was aware of the depth of his desire only because it had revealed itself to Judith; but he had seen, too, that no matter what she thought or how she might protest, her body would respond to him if he should reach for her. The one shred of redemption was that he kept his hands by his sides.

He asked: "Should I wait for you?"

Her eyes thanked him for not touching her, and she said: "It will take me only a minute to throw my coat on. I'll carry the rest of my clothes with me and dress at your house."

Side by side they hurried back in silence; and without their knowledge, their intimacy was in the way they walked—close enough so that they brushed against each other when the roughness of the path threw them together. Once she reached for his hand to steady herself and then let go immediately—so fast that he knew the contact dismayed her; for however much they had come to hate what had always been between them, it was still there, still warm, ready to spring to life at no

'more than a pulse beat; and so it was unnecessary for them to touch, talk, or even to look at each other.

When he opened the door to his own house, he saw Uncle Billy in his coat with a lighted lantern in his hand even though all the lamps in the room were ablaze.

"Did you just come?" John asked.

The old man looked at him with an odd expression and slowly shook his head. "No, I was just going out to fetch you," he said. "Your wife is dead."

John stood unbelieving, and weakness gradually drenched him, as if the blood of his body were being drained to leave only a black clot of guilt.

"Was she dead when you got here?"

"No," said Uncle Billy. "She was awake and calling for you."

"Did you tell her that I had gone for you?" John asked.

"Yes, I told her, and I told her you'd be back—after you had gone to Pengarth's."

He knew then what she must have thought of him in those last moments: that in spite of all his promises and protestations to her, when the end had come and she had really needed him, he had deserted her. Her last living knowledge of him was that he had gone to Judith. He tried to tell himself that he had only gone for help, but the memory of the desire he had felt on seeing Judith remained with him to mock the deep and overwhelming grief that came from what he now knew was his greatest, deepest loss.

Whatever delivery John had once prayed for at the height of his passion for Judith had now been granted in its fullest, most cruel measure, and he was numb.

Chapter Nineteen

1

WITHIN the few weeks since Saul's death the Vineyard earth, the sea, and the air suddenly changed. The year was pointing toward the spring. Snow still lay in shreds on the ground, but it was rotten with salt spray. A voluptuous sheen glinted in the bark of the trees, and the hard, dry joints of branches and twigs were rounding into small buds. The sky was bluer, and in the air was the hint of a mellow softness drifting slowly but inexorably northward from a thousand miles away. Soft golden days were coming. Even the sand, which the winter storms always washed out to sea, was beginning to return; and within the coming months the gaunt bare rocks along the shore would be buried beneath endless miles of smooth, white beach.

The graveyard, like the downs of which it was part, rolled with hillocks and vales. Long ago the great wild boulders had been cleared away by oxen from this one spot to make room for the small carved stone slabs that were used to mark human death.

Deborah's open grave was at the summit of the highest hill in the yard. From where John stood, hard by the minister, he could see the distant cliffs and glinting sea. The entire southwestern part of the island—white, green, and brown—rolled away to Gay Head in a heaving sea of earth, frozen into waves and eddies a million years ago. The land and the sea were endless in time: only the seasons and men changed.

At the foot of the hill, with heads bowed, stood the people

of the town—all the people John knew in the world. They looked up at him with grave pity, but he alone knew that the man who silently stared back at them was broken inside and sick with self-loathing. Behind John stood his daughter, his son-in-law, and their two small children. They were his family, but they were strangers.

The ancient words read by the new minister spoke of a grief and bereavement felt thousands of years before; yet the words were still so piercingly true and sad that the men and women at the graveside lowered their heads.

John alone stared straight ahead with despair for the woman who had been closer to him than anyone else could ever be again.

Below him the half circle of mourners stood just as silently as at Saul's funeral, and he wondered whether their minds were as full of questions now as they had been then. He felt that each pair of averted eyes had seen straight into him; that each of these people had, at one time or another, followed him and Judith in the walks that had once seemed so secret. Everyone must know that he had inexplicably gone to Judith when he should have been with Deborah.

He shouted his innocence to them beneath the continuing murmur of the minister's invocation, but the mourners seemed to know everything, and their silence was a cold wind of accusation.

In the centre of the group stood Judith, so conspicuous in her black clothes that she stood apart from everyone else. Slowly she raised her head to look up at him. Her face was very pale. At the moment she was the hard, silent woman he now saw; and she was also the passionate girl with whom he had laughed and walked hand in hand along the cliffs only a few months before.

Held by her eyes, he hated her, sick with revulsion as he

suddenly sensed that she was now feeling exactly what he himself had felt in this same graveyard a few weeks back, when their positions had been reversed—a secret glad relief; to Judith, Deborah's death could be only the release from the constant threat of having to face the reproach of a dearest friend. John tried to look away to be free of her for these last few minutes with Deborah, but there was to be no escape.

"Amen!" said the minister, and the ring of mourners raised their faces once more, and every face now seemed to stare in mute accusation up at John. And at last he was the one who bowed his head.

The pine box was lowered into the hole in the ground, and earth was thrown on it. The shovels worked with the rhythm of a beating heart. Dirt rained down on Deborah until only a corner of the box remained in view. When that was covered, Deborah was irrevocably dead, and John's grief finally overwhelmed him—pure, shattering, and more painful than anything he had ever known in his life; with no hint that it would ever end, with every promise that he would go on living it for the rest of his life.

Chapter Twenty

1

THE winds of early March blew out of the north-east and hurtled across the island, crucifying the old Pengarth oak against the grey house on the downs. The dead branches whipped, quivered, and groaned against the walls and windows, but from within the house John watched the agony with only distant interest.

In the month that had passed since Deborah's death, his face had grown thin and gaunt. The shadows around his eyes and on his cheeks were deepened by the lamplight as he stood at the window in the Pengarth parlour. It was the end of winter, and daylight still died early. Judith sat in her rocker by the stove. They were both dressed in black, and his riding boots glinted with red highlights.

When he stands erect that way in his new clothes, she was thinking, he looks from the back like a tall and slender strong young man. Only his face and his dead voice tell what he really is.

"Did you find all the papers you needed?" she asked after a while.

"Yes," he said without turning. "I'll take them back to Edgartown with me and settle the case in a few days. Saul was right. We'll get our price."

"Do you plan to go on staying with Esther?"

"I don't know," he said. "Doesn't make much difference one way or another. I'm not ready to come back home yet. As I rode here past the house, I found myself looking away. I still don't feel right out here."

"I think I'd feel the same wherever I found myself," said Judith quietly. "Your life is always with you."

He shrugged as he looked out across the hills. "Perhaps; but there are some places that are more painful to be in than others."

"Is this room very painful to you, John?"

"No," he admitted. "I thought it would be worse. I dreaded coming."

The house shivered with the tumult of an eddy in the wind, and Judith calmly waited for the clatter to die away.

"I kept wondering when you would come—if you would ever come at all."

"I didn't know myself," he said. "At one time I was sure I'd never see you again. Or at least I'd wait so long that everything would be forgotten."

She rocked in silence, but he didn't turn to see her expression.

"I was wondering what you were going to do," he went on.

"I had no plans," she said quietly. "You knew where I was. You knew how to find me. What you'd do, or not do, was going to decide everything."

"That's harsh," he said. "Harsh, but fair."

She ceased rocking. "Why harsh?"

"Because whatever happens will then be my doing—mine alone."

"Well?" Her irony and challenge were only barely perceptible.

"Everything that ever stood in our way has been either pushed away or smashed, so now we're free to go to each other—with open seas before us and down-wind all the way; but I can't marry you, Judith. All the things that would have made such a marriage good are the things that have gone to the bottom."

Judith stared out of the wind-chattering window through which she had screamed for Saul to come back. She looked pale, thoughtful, and hard.

• "It's that you don't want to marry me, John. Not can't."

"Very well," he admitted. "The truth is: I don't."

"I suppose I want it as little as you do," she said in a dead voice. "The times we were together, the afternoons on the beach when we walked holding hands are all a long, long time ago—on the far side of dreadful things."

"I'm not saying I don't love you, Judith."

"No," she said. "But we're not talking about that. I don't even know it was love that brought us together. There was this thing outside ourselves, so bent on pushing us into each other's lives that it did terrible things. I can still remember when it seemed to be something gay—like the time the sheep turned away from us. We laughed then because we thought it a kind of playful magic. But every obstacle was turned away until finally you and I stood in the graveyard."

For an instant the March gale lulled, and the oaken branches drew away from the house, only to be splatted back again with the sound of tearing wood. There was more quiet in the tautness of the wind's highest tension than in its momentary slack. Judith looked directly at John towering above her, and went on:

"It's useless to say you won't marry me, John. You will."

His dark face was sombre, but full of purpose as he shook his head.

"No, Judith."

"Because if you don't," she continued quietly, "if you put yourself in the way of whatever it is that's pushing us together, you'll be making yourself only another obstacle to be treated with no more mercy than Saul and Deborah."

He frowned down at her before he spoke.

"You really believe there was such a magic?" he asked with slow wonder. "You can still believe that it was something outside ourselves?"

"Yes, John, I do."

"There was no magic!" he cried out in sudden torment. "There was nothing—just two people, hungry for each other, making their own chances to be together!"

"There were too many things, John."

"What things?" he demanded with scorn. "That without any signals or agreements beforehand, I could go over to the cliffs and find you there at the same moment? How was that magic? Don't I know you well enough to know what you'd be doing at any time of the day? Whenever I wanted to see you, it wasn't hard to know how to find you. And whenever you wanted to see me, you knew where I'd be. Like children, we could tell ourselves it was magic." He twisted the word with contempt. "But we lived with no magic, Judith. We were only two neighbours who knew every article and detail of each other's lives!"

Judith listened to him silently, and her fine dark eyes burned with anger and disdain.

"Why must you rip it away?" she said. "Why must you smash the one belief that kept us from looking despicable in our own sight? If all the heartache, maiming, and killing were simply our own doing, then we are sinful, selfish people. As long as I could believe that there was something outside ourselves, I could bear with what was happening and protect you from knowing things that would have torn you to pieces!"

"From knowing what things?"

"From knowing what happened on the night that Saul died."

He looked at her sharply but remained silent, and she went on accusingly: "You don't want to hear, do you, John?"

Still he said nothing.

"But now that I've started," she continued, "you don't want me to stop."

"What happened?"

"Saul knew that I loved another man."

"You told him?" he asked in a slow voice.

"I didn't tell him. He just knew, and it drove him out of his mind. I sat here, where I am sitting now, and he was standing exactly where you are. He went to pieces before my very eyes. He ran out into the snow because he thought he saw the man out there. That's why he had the pistol."

"Did he know that I was the man?"

She smiled slightly with contempt. "It could not have made it more painful for him, John, and certainly not easier to bear. No," she said. "I didn't tell him. If not telling him was sparing him, then at least I spared him that. But that was all."

"He was out of his mind?" John asked faintly.

"That's one way to put it. You could as easily say he stood in our way and had to be removed."

John said very slowly: "And what did you do, Judith, to help him remove himself?"

She shook her head. "I did nothing. I couldn't even stop him. Just as you couldn't keep yourself from leaving Deborah when you knew she was dying."

"I didn't know she was dying," he said. "God help me, I didn't know!"

"Then you see, I was right. There is something outside ourselves making things happen that we can't stop."

"No!" he said with violence. "It's a lie! Whatever happened, we made happen. I must have known Deborah was dying. I didn't," he added sadly. "But it comes to the same thing. When she awoke that last night and found that I was over here with you, she must have thought that everything I had told her was a lie."

"What had you told her? And why should she think it was a lie?"

"Because all along she knew about us, Judith. We never fooled her for a minute. All the time we thought we were alone, miles away from the nearest pair of eyes, she knew we were together."

• "And you knew this all the time I thought we were alone?" Her tone made him flush darkly.

"She never talked about it until the end a few weeks ago, and I didn't deny anything. I wanted to love her again and told her so."

"When she came to stay with me after Saul's death, she came even though she knew?"

"I told you, she knew from the very beginning. But she didn't go out of her mind. She was angry, but in her heart she knew that I wanted to come back to her, and that was true. She believed it until the end, when she found that I was with you. And so, at the very last, I was the one who smashed her belief. I can't tell myself that it was done by any magic or anything outside of me. Just as I can't believe that Saul ran out of this house to look for a man by accident."

"You believe that I made him go?"

"I believe that he didn't run out of the house by accident," John repeated stubbornly. "I don't know how, and I don't know why. But I do know what I did to Deborah. And I believe that you did something like that to Saul. There's no magic, Judith. There's just the two of us and what we were determined to get, no matter who was hurt."

He took up his cap and coat and crushed Saul's papers into his pocket.

"And all to no point," he added. "Love dies, no matter what you do to save it. Sooner or later it kills itself. If it could die between Deborah and me, then what you and I have will die too. If it hasn't already. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, John," she said as he went to the hall. "But I'm

warning you again: don't try to stand in our way; you'll only be destroying what little there is left of you. You'll come back, and I'll be here—waiting. Not with any joy."

When he opened the door, he stepped out in a writhing world of wind. The sky flowed low over him in masses of cloud, forming, breaking, shredding, and flying in the winter's demoniacal effort to hold back the coming spring. The dead grass beneath his feet thrummed like vibrating tongues of the earth. The skirts of his coat whipped his booted leg. A sudden gust blew his cap whirling through the air and then along the ground, careening over the hills and out of sight.

He untethered his horse, which was frightened and shivering with panic. As he began to mount, the tearing sound in the old tree began once more, and the horse reared away from it, entangling John's caught foot in the stirrup, so that he was thrown violently to the ground.

As if the world were slowly turning over and falling on him, he saw the great tree approach him from out of the sky, closer and closer, as in a dream. The tearing of wood became a roar. The massive trunk smashed down into the earth, missing him by inches. He disentangled himself from the clutching branches as if they were foul and evil. He was beyond thought, and fled back to the only haven he knew, in the house, pressing his torn face against Judith's. His eyes were closed and he trembled.

"We must stay together," he whispered. "But, oh God, how can we ever be happy?"

Judith's face showed nothing. She stroked his head absently, not as if he were her lover, but as if he were some inanimate object whose worn texture was familiar to her hand.

"From the moment you first touched me," she said, "we were meant to be together; but that doesn't mean that we were meant to be happy!"

